

how fast the evening passes

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how fast the evening passes

by [meridies](#)

Summary

Two weeks into his first semester at university, Tommy is unceremoniously expelled. He returns home in shame.

But it's not just *his* actions that throw their family into upheaval— what really does the trick is Wilbur, also returning home from a budding career in Los Angeles, purely because of Tommy's mistakes. As Techno and Phil struggle to find their footing in a house that has suddenly reunited, the four of them attempt to become a family once more.

Notes

this entire fic originated from techno's quote in mcc5 where he says "i feel like my little brother just came back from college expelled." and it was supposed to be a oneshot. then i wrote 30k words for it because i have no self restraint.

mild cw: mentions of smoking. enjoy!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy returns home in shame.

Shame may be too kind of a word for it. More accurately, he returns home with his tail between his legs, all false bravado drained away. Head ducked, cheeks red, burning from the humiliation of it all. He doesn't talk when he greets them in the airport, and he keeps his shoulders hunched the entirety of the drive home.

It's smart, too, because Phil takes one look at the email he receives and nearly explodes.

Expelled. Two weeks into his freshman year at university.

Techno sits in his room and hears the words fly outside, burning and hot.

"It's not my fault, if you had seen the shit that—"

"I don't care what happened, I care that twenty five thousand dollars were wasted on this—"

"I'm sorry! What else can I say! I did my best—"

"Your best was two weeks worth? Is that all you have to offer?"

"Sorry I'm a fuck up, then, what else do you want me to apologize for?"

Techno turns the music up on his headphones and refuses to listen, although every word sears itself into his soul. The drum beats directly into his heart.

All through the night, Techno hears them argue with each other. It fades from riotous and violent shouting into quiet but fierce bickering. By the time Techno finally gets some fitful sleep, they've finally quieted down. Tommy slams a few doors in the meantime. Phil shouts himself hoarse. Techno suspects that none of them get a lick of sleep.

The morning sun shines through the windows, dappled and filtering through the blinds. Techno blinks awake, although it feels like he hasn't slept at all. The words from last night are still ringing through his head. He almost wants to stay in his room, dissolve into the mattress, until everything around him has faded away.

Techno blearily checks his phone, still sleepy and in bed, and freezes.

The text reads: *I heard about Tommy. My flight lands tonight.*

Techno rereads it again, just to make sure that he isn't dreaming.

And then again, and then again. On the fourth read, Techno finally accepts it as fact.

Techno sighs.

He doesn't know what he expected.

Techno pushes himself out of bed and goes to pour himself a cup of coffee. He's gotten into it

recently, although anyone who knows him would swear that Techno's been addicted to coffee for years now. He takes his with two creams, five sugars, just sweet and milky enough that he can barely taste the coffee at all.

Tommy is the next to emerge from his room. He still hasn't recovered from whatever verbal lashing Phil gave him, clearly, because his cheeks are ruddy like he's been crying. Tommy crosses over to the fridge and stares determinedly at the milk inside.

"Good morning," Techno says politely.

Tommy's glare is fierce. "Gonna make fun of me, too?"

"I didn't say anything about that."

"You're thinking about it."

Pointedly, Techno says, "I *think* you're projecting."

Tommy slams the fridge, brushes past him, shoulders him too harshly. "Just give me a heads up when you're going to put me on blast, okay? Because Phil already yelled at me last night, and I'm really not in the fucking mood to hear it from you too."

Everything about him is braced with bravado and false courage. Techno sucks in a breath, knowing he's about to shatter all of that, and he says, "Wilbur texted me."

Tommy gapes at him.

"He's flying back tonight," Techno adds.

The milk carton falls from Tommy's hands and splashes over the floor. It's almost comical.

"Clean that up," Techno says dismissively, though he's fairly sure he would have the same reaction if he were in Tommy's shoes.

Face red, Tommy fumbles to pick up the carton and for some paper towels. He mops up the milk messily and doesn't say anything for a long moment.

Voice hushed, Tommy says, "Is he really?"

"Guess that's proof that you really fucked up."

"Thanks," Tommy mutters, almost an automatic response. His voice is sour. "I wanted another reminder of it."

"There's no need to be angry at me," Techno says. "Save it for him."

"Is he really coming back?" Tommy repeats, and there's a sick sense of dread working its way into his words. Like he can't possibly believe that Wilbur is returning, and at the same time, the reality of it is sickening and thick.

"He told me himself," Techno says, and ignores how the eight words that Wilbur sent him are eating away at him as well. "He said his flight lands tonight."

Tommy glares at the wall. "You're lying."

Techno looks blankly at him. "Why would I lie to you?"

“I don’t know,” Tommy says defensively, “You’re not the most honest person I know.”

“Don’t bother picking a fight with me. Save your energy. I’m not worth it.”

Tommy narrows his eyes. Casually, like he’s trying not to show how much it affects him, he says, “So. Um. Does Wilbur text you pretty often?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.” A breath, like he’s relieved. “Me either, then.”

The thing about Tommy is that he goes around the world like he’s the main character of it, and currently, his jealousy is loud and vibrant, and it fills up all the empty space. His emotions are always overdone. Techno used to chide him for it, and say that he needed to think with his head more than his heart. Looks like that’s something Tommy still needs to grow out of.

“But I hate him so much,” Tommy continues, and his anger burns brightest of all. “Why is he coming back now, huh?”

“You got expelled,” Techno says plainly. “That’s why.”

Tommy glowers at him. “I hope Wilbur’s plane crashes.”

“You don’t mean that,” Techno says automatically, although there’s a voice in the back of his head, feeble and hushed, that whispers, *would that really be so bad?*

Techno pushes that thought away. He knows that he doesn’t mean it.

Looking at Tommy, eyebrows narrowed and shoulders hunched with failure, Techno isn’t so sure Tommy thinks the same.

When the afternoon approaches, Techno waits on the porch for his older brother to arrive.

The sun is dropping below the west, and the light has changed from white to yellow to orange, and the streetlamps have turned on, one by one. Absentmindedly Techno’s hand flicks open the cap of his lighter, then closes it again. It’s oddly loud in the silence.

He checks his messages again. He doesn’t know exactly when Wilbur is arriving, but he assumes it’s sometime soon. Although he did say *tonight*, and that can mean anywhere from four in the afternoon until midnight.

So Techno waits. He watches cars drive past and wonders which one his brother will arrive in.

Twenty six minutes after Techno first sits down, a black car pulls up to the curb. It’s sleek. Freshly polished. Wilbur Soot Watson steps out of it.

He’s wearing sunglasses. That’s the first thing that Techno notices— dark and tinted, perched low on his nose. They slip down when he bends to retrieve a suitcase from the trunk. He’s in this black duffle coat— horn buttons and everything— even though it’s seventy degrees in early autumn.

Techno can tell the minute their eyes lock that Wilbur isn’t excited to be home.

The thing is that they haven't seen each other in nearly six years, and who would be excited to return home after that?

It hasn't exactly been six years. Techno knows exactly how long it's been, and his mind whispers the time to him traitorously: *five years, eight months, three days*. Five years, eight months, three days since Wilbur graduated a year early from college, moved out west the second his diploma was in his hand. He somehow managed to make it big in Hollywood. Lord knows how he did it, because he hasn't told any of them.

Wilbur drags his suitcase up the steps towards the porch and stills when he sees Techno.

"Techno," Wilbur says stiffly.

"Wilbur," Techno returns, just as stiffly.

He's just as tall as Techno remembers. Maybe a little taller, given the boots that he's wearing. Thick-soled and black. He looks like he's dressed for the winter.

Wilbur glances past him to the door. "Is Tommy inside?"

Techno gestures with his free hand. "Go for it."

Wilbur wrinkles his nose as he passes. "Do you smoke now?"

Techno considers the stub of the cigarette in between his fingers, knows that he'll shower as soon as he gets inside. Phil doesn't like it when the house smells like smoke.

"Sure," Techno says. "I suppose."

Wilbur frowns. "That'll kill you."

Absurdly, Techno's mind surfaces a memory of when they played as kids, cops and robbers, breaking each other out of mock-jail. Astronauts and aliens, exploring the very depths of the backyard. Hoisting Tommy up onto the peach tree, so he could clamber all the way to the top.

That tree is long gone now, cut down. *Termites*, Phil had said, by way of explanation. Who was Techno to argue with that?

"Maybe," Techno says, "Maybe not."

Wilbur considers him for a moment longer, and then tsks. The sound ricochets. The front door slams shut behind him, and privately Techno is grateful that he's not Tommy. Scorn coming from Wilbur is a dozen times worse than any other type of scorn in the Watson family.

Techno takes another thick breath in, another exhale.

It's true. The smoking is a habit he desperately needs to break, and yet he's terribly dependent on it. Of course it's only Wilbur's words that make him feel anxious to quit.

Even from outside, he can hear Wilbur shout, at full volume, "*Thomas Watson!*"

Techno flinches. No one uses Tommy's full name, only his nickname, and to hear it come from Wilbur is as damaging as it can be.

The cigarette in his hand burns down to the butt. There's nothing more to get from it, so Techno stubs it out onto the concrete and tosses it into the garbage bin. He takes a moment to breathe

deeply before going inside. He hopes they're not shouting. Techno's had enough shouting to last a lifetime.

Techno opens the door slowly, and he can hear the vestiges of harsh words exchanged on the other side of the house. Techno is grateful that his bedroom isn't over there. The tone of Wilbur's voice is enough to make him cringe.

He showers. He wishes he had the forethought to play music while he does. Once the smell of smoke is firmly washed off him, and he pops a piece of mint gum into his mouth, Techno seeks out Phil.

Phil is in his bedroom, like he tends to be these days, and he glances over at Techno when he enters.

"Hi," Techno mutters, and closes the bedroom door behind him firmly.

"Techno," Phil says, and moves over on the sofa so Techno has room to sit next to him. "You said hello to Wil?"

The last six years have aged Techno's father a bit. He's far from the sprightly young man that he was when he first adopted Techno, and far from the slightly wiser, kinder man who adopted Tommy and Wilbur years later. The stress of raising three teenage boys has certainly taken its toll.

Techno nods. "I saw him arrive."

There's muted noises coming from Tommy's bedroom. Techno can't make out exactly what they're saying, but he can hear the contempt in their voices.

Tommy was always closest to Wilbur. It likely hurt the most when Wilbur left, then.

"I haven't talked to him yet," Phil admits, and it sounds painful to say out loud. "He went straight to Tommy."

Techno exhales. "That's just how it is, I guess."

Silence falls thickly over them. The voices across the house have quieted slightly.

"Did you still want to go to that Greek place tomorrow?" Techno asks. "I was thinking about making a reservation."

Phil considers it. "I was reading the Yelp review. It seems decent."

Techno hums. "I'll call them, then. It'll be nice to... to get out of the house a bit."

Vividly Techno misses when it was just him and Phil in the house, in those two weeks between disasters. It was very quiet and peaceful. It was like being a child again, before his two other siblings arrived.

Of course Techno is thankful that he has brothers, and he's sure that his life wouldn't be the same without them. But there's something purely unique and beautiful about his relationship with Phil, in that if one were to pull all of Techno's happiest memories from his head and watch them, nearly all of them would take place with Phil. Learning how to bake. Taking fencing lessons for the first time. Playing the violin at cheesy elementary school recitals. All things that he did with Phil's help, with his dad at his side.

“I think it’ll be nice,” Phil says, breaking Techno from his memories, “To have everyone back.”

“How long is he staying?”

Phil shrugs. “He told me last night he was coming back. I don’t know for how long.”

“And Tommy?” Techno dares to ask.

“He’s expelled for all of first semester,” Phil says, “At least, that’s what I gathered from the email?”

Techno tilts his head back and sighs. “So he’s here until next January?”

“If he goes back,” Phil says. “But...”

He doesn’t say anything else. Techno gathers that there’s a story there to be unpacked, and hesitantly he asks, “Did he tell you how he got expelled?”

Phil tilts his head towards him, and then his eyes go towards the bedroom door, as if expecting to see Wilbur and Tommy there. “I know the basics, I suppose. Tommy hasn’t told me his side of the story. Tensions were a little high last night.”

Techno laughs dryly. “That’s an understatement.”

“I know,” Phil mutters, “And I know I need to apologize to him for— for everything I said. But at the same time—”

Techno nods. “He’s so stupid.”

“Expelled,” Phil mutters, as if saying it again will make the reverse happen. “I can’t believe it.”

“Some parent you are,” Techno jokes. He can tell it hits closer to home than he intended, though.

“Tommy accused me of playing favorites,” Phil says, and his voice is hushed. Techno can instantly tell that this is the comment that’s been eating away at Phil, like acid at his system. “I don’t think he’s very glad to be home.”

Techno doesn’t really know what to say to that.

“At least he has friends here,” Techno says, as if that’s a balm for the situation. “Being home for a semester can’t be that bad, right?”

Phil looks doubtful, but he sighs. “I hope so.”

There’s silence for another moment, and Techno glances over at his dad, wanting to say something to take the tension out of his shoulders, but not sure what to say.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” he offers, though it feels weak. “The house is... it feels suffocating.”

“Not sure I want to leave Wilbur and Tommy alone,” Phil says.

“A glass of wine, then.”

Phil raises an eyebrow.

“If you insist,” he says finally.

Techno hums. He pushes himself up, moves out into the kitchen. “Red or white?”

Phil cocks his head, though he looks distracted, like he’s trying to listen to his two other sons talk. “Either.”

Techno hums, and he retrieves two wine glasses from the cabinet. This night needs a drink, he thinks, especially because the buzz of the nicotine has long since faded from his system. His fingers tap at his side irritably, and he catches the look that Phil gives him.

“Don’t give me that look,” Techno says. “I’m working on it.”

“You’d better.”

Gratefully Phil accepts the glass of wine that Techno offers him, and takes a slow sip. The warmth spreads through Techno’s chest as well, heating him from the inside out.

“I’m serious,” Phil says. “It’s a bad habit.”

Techno sighs. “Save your lectures for Tommy.”

Again, Phil glances towards the room where Wilbur and Tommy are presumably talking. Their hostile shouting and arguments have faded, and even Techno can’t hear what they’re saying to each other. He’s sure Tommy will tell him afterwards, though. That is, if Wilbur won’t first.

“I think Tommy’s had enough of the lectures,” Phil says, “He doesn’t need more of them.”

“Ah,” Techno says, and tilts his glass in Phil’s direction. “Using the big brother parenting hack. I know all your tricks.”

“As long as he and Wilbur don’t try to burn down the house, I’m fine with anything that happens between them.”

Techno laughs. He feels warm; he’s never been good at holding his liquor, even just a glass of wine. “You might be onto something there.”

There’s a moment of silence. The alcohol is making him sleepy, making his eyes droop. It’s late, much later than he usually stays up.

“Maybe they would burn down the house,” Techno muses. “Remember that Fourth of July, where —”

Phil finishes his sentence. “Wilbur and Tommy set off those fireworks in the backyard? And the cops got called on the two of them?”

Fourth of July, over a decade ago. Wilbur, with his wry smile and his freshly minted fake ID, had purchased illegal fireworks from a gas station. He had taught Tommy (barely eight years old at the time) how to wire them up so they would explode brighter. God knows where he learned how to do it. He almost roped Techno into their crazy ploy, and Techno is very glad that he managed to resist.

“That was a fun time,” Techno muses, thinking about the vibrant colors and the taste of gunpowder in the wind, “Remember when the police got called because of the noise?”

“And Cassidy next door complained to them,” Phil says, and he’s grinning, almost lost in the memory.

“They were so upset with her, didn’t she get the complaint instead?”

“All they did was make Tommy promise to be more quiet.”

“And at the same time they’re talking, Wilbur and I were scrambling to try and hide all the fireworks in the garage just in case they decided to check the backyard.”

Comfortable silence falls between them. Techno drains his wine glass, watches the final drops of red swirl around in the basin, and sets it down on the counter. He’s had enough to help him sleep and relax; he doesn’t need any more.

He opens his mouth, intending to talk more about those memories from childhood, soft and tinged with bittersweetness, but never gets the chance. Because finally, two hours after Wilbur first exploded his way into the Watson household, Tommy’s bedroom door swings open.

Wilbur comes striding out, looking unaffected and unemotional. Tommy appears in the doorway, head ducked, eyes shadowed, and Techno doesn’t know whether it was good or not that Wilbur came home only to rebuke him.

Wilbur glances over the kitchen counter. Neither Techno nor Phil move. There’s a pregnant pause, and Wilbur breaks the silence.

“Is my room still good to sleep in?”

“Yes,” Phil says. “It’s pretty much the same.”

“Excellent.”

His voice is anything but excited.

“You’re planning on staying long?” Techno says, as nonchalantly as possible.

“I took the courtesy of a three week vacation,” Wilbur shrugs. “The family card gets you anything.”

“Surprised you even had to use the family card,” Techno says. “Thought you were too big for that.”

There’s a touch of jealousy in his voice. Techno hopes no one noticed, but as usual, his luck is never good enough for that.

“I still have to give a reason,” Wilbur says, voice slightly cold. “It’s my job.”

Techno doesn’t have the heart to say that he simply doesn’t care what Wilbur gets up to in his free time anymore, and instead turns down the hallway towards both of their rooms, leaving Phil and Tommy behind in the kitchen to talk.

Wilbur and Techno’s childhood rooms are right across the hall from each other. Back when they were both kids, they would throw paper airplanes to each other from their doorways, when they were upset at each other. It was their form of communicating.

“Funny that you’re back,” Techno comments, when Wilbur follows him as well. “Don’t recall seeing you around the last five years.”

“Go figure,” Wilbur mutters.

“Same as ever.”

“Anyone ever told you that you’ve gotten more annoying?”

“Many times,” Techno says. He still lives with Phil and Tommy, after all.

Wilbur clicks on the light in his childhood bedroom. He stops in the doorway for a second, a brief moment of wonder, before it passes. He tosses his duffel bag onto his bed, slings his coat over his desk chair, and then turns to look at Techno.

“I missed you, you know,” Wilbur says.

The sound that escapes Techno’s throat is scornful. “How many times did you call me in the last five years?”

“I’m trying to be nice,” Wilbur mutters. “You could say you missed me back, too.”

“I missed you too,” Techno tries, though the words feel strange and sticky in his mouth.

Does he miss Wilbur? Over time, things have grown over the hole that Wilbur left. Vines and leaves and flowers have repaired the damage that was left behind. Still, there’s always been some part of Techno that never quite healed. Healed from what, Techno doesn’t know.

Wilbur looks at him. Techno looks back evenly.

“Alright,” Wilbur mutters, and strips the second layer he’s wearing, some thin black sweater that screams pretentiousness. “It’s a start, I guess.”

Techno leans against the doorway. Wilbur’s room is the one place of their house that has gone mostly untouched, and it’s evident. A fine layer of dust covers the tops of his bookshelves, and grime is on the windowsill. Wilbur runs an unconcerned finger over it.

“Phil didn’t touch your room,” Techno offers. “It’s just the same.”

He watches Wilbur poke around for a little bit. He opens his desk drawers and seems surprised to find all of his high school supplies still in there. The drawers are long since emptied, either given as second-hand outfits to Tommy or to Goodwill, for someone else. The closet has remained mostly untouched.

Wilbur opens the door, flicks through the hangers, and then pauses.

“This jacket,” he muses. “I forgot I even owned it.”

The jacket in question is orange corduroy, lined with white, with too many pockets and buttons. Wilbur had found that while they were thrift shopping, looking for winter clothes. Back in 2008, when things had suddenly tightened up in terms of finances and for a few terrible months, they were adrift without an anchor to hold them steady.

“It’s ugly as hell,” Techno says, stomach twisting.

“I think it has some charm,” Wilbur muses. “Don’t you think?”

“It deserves to be burned.”

“You always have such eloquent opinions.”

“I’m known for them.”

Techno thinks about that stupid jacket and all the other things hanging in Wilbur's closet. He and Tommy should have thrown them out when they had the chance.

"How's Tommy?"

Wilbur blinks at him. His hand is still clenched around the collar of the corduroy jacket. With slow, precise movements, he hangs it back up. He shuts the closet door. He doesn't respond until Techno opens his mouth again, not sure what he wants to say, and Wilbur says, "He's a mess."

Even a baby could tell that much, Techno thinks.

"You were talking for two hours," Techno says instead, "Share with the class."

The look Wilbur gives him is harsh. "He's my brother too, you know."

So where were you? Techno wants to shout. *He's your brother, and you left him behind.*

Wilbur's face is set in stone, and he glares away. Begins unzipping his suitcase. Begins sorting through everything he's brought as he says, "Tommy will be okay. He just needs someone to keep him on the straight and narrow. Hence why I'm here."

He waves a hand, as if it's no big deal at all.

"He's always looked up to you," Techno says. *Too much* goes unspoken.

Wilbur, the hotshot director who moved to Los Angeles and somehow managed to strike gold, even while flying blind. Phil had made Techno go to watch his most recent movie in theaters, and Techno had stared blankly at the screen the entire time. He hated to admit that it was decent.

The last he heard, Wilbur was at the Oscars. Pretty white teeth and everything. Phil had tuned in, had apparently been texting Wilbur the entire night.

Techno thinks it's pretty shit of Wilbur to just ditch the family like that. Then again, a relationship goes both ways. He supposes that he's also to blame.

Wilbur's voice is matter-of-fact. "And I looked up to you, and you looked up to Phil. That's the way things go."

It's so hard to think of Wilbur as his older brother when he was adopted second. Even though Wilbur is older and Techno is younger, they've fallen into this strange dynamic neither of them can escape from. They're always dancing around the other, not sure who holds more importance, not sure how to act, and that feeling only heightened as soon as Wilbur graduated.

"We're not talking about me here," Techno says, although he feels like he's missing the point somewhat. "Is Tommy okay or not?"

Wilbur pauses from sorting through clothes. He keeps his face determinedly blank as he says, "He'll probably throw a temper tantrum tonight and cry himself to sleep. It's his fault for making stupid decisions."

Techno hums. "Los Angeles changed you."

"What's that supposed to be?"

"There was a time when you were just as stupid as Tommy is being right now," Techno says.

“Ten years ago,” Wilbur scoffs, and he tosses a shirt to the side. It’s reminiscent of how Techno himself sorts through his laundry.

“Ten years isn’t so long a time.”

“For Christ’s sake,” Wilbur says, “You aren’t even twenty four yet. Ten years is ages.”

There’s a note of irritation in his voice. Techno receives the message loud and clear. *Change the subject.*

“Alright,” Techno says, “Ten years is a while. Happy?”

“Barely,” snarks Wilbur.

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Seems like nothing has changed at all, then,” Wilbur says, and slams his suitcase shut. He’s barely done any unpacking at all, more just needing something to do with his hands. “So— you’re planning on applying to graduate school, then?”

It’s the slimmest olive branch towards connection that Techno has ever seen, but he recognizes what Wilbur is trying to do, and so he plays along.

“I’ve just started my gap year,” he says. “I have time.”

“Still studying English?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Still want to be an author?”

“That’s the plan,” Techno repeats, duller.

Wilbur’s expression is guarded. “And you’re still living with Phil?”

There’s a hint of reproach in his voice. Techno turns.

“Until my lease gets finalized in New York, yes.”

Wilbur snorts. “Opposite coasts, huh?”

“At least I’m not living in gentrification,” Techno says.

He looked up pictures of Wilbur Soot’s beautiful little beach house. All red shingles and white washed walls. It’s in Venice Beach, right by the beachside, patterned with shells and waves. If gentrification had a picture next to it in the dictionary, it would be that.

“Like New York is much better,” Wilbur says. “Where exactly are you moving again?”

“Brooklyn,” Techno says.

Wilbur considers that for a moment, then clicks his tongue dismissively. “Have fun on your own, I guess.”

“You have no right to say that.”

“Los Angeles is nice this time of year,” Wilbur says, neatly diverting the conversation, “Sunny and warm.”

Techon hums, unwilling to let him escape that easily. “Lord knows you need the sun. Or do you just get fake tans these days?”

“The best money can buy,” Wilbur answers.

“Embarrassing.”

“Classy,” Wilbur says.

“Good to know the habit of lying to yourself never stopped.”

“I was never lying to myself,” Wilbur corrects. “Everything I said came true.”

Performative speech.

The words bubble to the surface of Techno’s mind like milk, foaming over on the stove.

“I’m remembering why I didn’t miss you at all,” he says.

“You have always been a terrible liar,” Wilbur retorts, and claps a hand on Techno’s shoulder. It’s warm and heavy and only the slightest bit forbearing. “Good to see that hasn’t changed.”

Irritably, Techno brushes Wilbur’s hand off.

He and Wilbur have always been too similar for their own good. That used to be the case. Clearly, both of them have been functioning just fine.

“Lots of things have changed,” Techno says, “You just aren’t around to see them.”

“Like Tommy getting taller,” Wilbur says, a glimmer of a smile, like he’s trying to make a joke between the two of them. “A lot taller, I see.”

Techno fixes him with a cold glare. “I don’t think you understand what I’m getting at here.”

“So explain it to me.”

Equally cold, the brothers stare each other down.

Techno runs all the options through his mind of things to say, words to use, and realizes that there’s no words coming to the front of his mind. Everything in his head is a swirling mass of things, half-baked envy and sodden turmoil, and there’s no way he can shape these wild, intangible ideas into something Wilbur will understand.

“Not tonight,” Techno says, and he feels terribly heavy all of a sudden. “I’m going to sleep.”

Wilbur takes what looks like a practiced step backwards. “Sleep well, then.”

The words sound strange in his mouth, like affection is a tool he has forgotten how to use.

In the bare second it takes for Techno to cross the carpeted hallway to his own room, Wilbur’s door has clicked shut and locked.

Techno stares at the closed door for a moment before forcibly turning away. He feels like he’s

grappling with himself, trying to stick two opposing magnets together that refuse to get close. There's no winning in this situation, is there?

The warmth in his stomach from the wine earlier is gone. The house is frigid and cold.

It makes Techno want to burn it just to feel the warmth.

But he doesn't do that; he doesn't go talk to Phil again to calm down; he doesn't go talk to Tommy, though he can hear his little brother pacing through the walls, muttering to himself, making a cold pit form in Techno's gut.

It was so much easier when they were younger.

But he's not fifteen anymore; the world is moving on, and Techno has to move with it.

But when he falls asleep that night, achingly aware of Wilbur across the hallway, Tommy and Phil on the other side of the house, he dreams of the summertime— when it was the four of them, young and alive, united against the world.

Chapter End Notes

if you enjoyed, please leave kudos or comments, they are greatly appreciated! i'll be updating every saturday <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Family arguments, grocery shopping, and going illegal speeds on the highway. All of them are trying their best, but Techno doesn't know how to bridge the gap between the four of them.

Chapter Notes

i quite literally forgot that i picked saturdays as my update day until thirty minutes ago but thankfully i had this chapter mostly finished. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno wakes up early enough that no one, not even Wilbur, is awake.

He's grateful for it, as he sets about brewing a cup of coffee and steps onto the back porch once it's done. His hand goes to his pajama pockets, and Techno sets the mug on the arm of a bench while he brings the cigarette to his lips.

It's barely the end of September, and already the autumn cold has crawled across the sky. Techno can feel the chill seeping in through his shoes and through the thin fabric of his pajamas, and he shivers. The coffee and cigarette do nothing to warm him up much at all.

There's a creaking, scraping sound that comes from around the back of the house. Techno tilts his head curiously— he's sure it's just a stray cat or a raccoon, but to his surprise Tommy edges his way around the wall.

“Techno,” Tommy says, caught in the act. “How are you?”

Techno's careful to blow smoke away from his little brother. “Any reason why you're sneaking out at six in the morning?”

Tommy has the audacity to look ashamed. “I'll just— I'll go back inside. No need to tell Phil about this.”

Techno huffs a laugh. “I won't tell.”

Tommy narrows his eyes at him, and this close up, Techno can see how dark the bags under his eyes are. He looks like he's barely slept, tossing and turning the entire night. Techno doesn't blame him one bit.

“Fine,” Tommy says eventually. “I was going to hang out with Tubbo.”

“This early?” Techno says dryly, and shrugs. “Whatever. I won't stop you.”

“I'm grounded,” Tommy scowls. “There's not really another time.”

“You don’t think Phil is going to knock on your door in four hours and ask where you are?”

Tommy looks vaguely confident when he says, “No. He feels bad about yelling at me so I made him promise to leave me alone for the whole day. Plus I was... counting on you distracting Wilbur.”

“I’m not participating in your little scheme,” Techno says, and points his cigarette at him. “Maybe I *will* snitch on you.”

“Please don’t,” Tommy says, looking pained. “I’m grounded for a *month*. Phil won’t even let me out of the house without someone coming along with me. I’ll go insane.”

Techno’s mouth tastes of smoke and coffee filters as he pauses. He made it just a little too strong this morning, enough that it almost feels like he’s chewing the coffee grounds themselves.

Techno considers that. “Fine. I’ll distract Wilbur, but if you get caught, I’m not saving you. Go get in trouble all you want on your own.”

The tension visibly drains from Tommy’s shoulders, and he goes to the bike rack without a second thought, unlocking his bike quickly and swinging a leg over it. He doesn’t bother with a helmet, Techno notes, but he supposes they all have their own self-destructive tendencies in a way.

“You promise you won’t tell?” Tommy asks again.

Techno flicks his fingers dismissively. “Don’t you trust me?”

Tommy surveys him for a moment longer, eyes shrewd, and then pedals off. He stops briefly at the front gate; Techno hears it unlock, swing open and shut again, and then the whizzing of a bike down the street.

The cigarette burns itself down to the filter. It hollows out some already empty place inside of Techno’s chest, like there’s a space in him that’ll never quite be filled. His coffee has gone cold, too. He stares at the place where his younger brother just vanished and wishes that he, too, could vanish as easily as that.

“G’ morning,” Phil yawns, when Techno comes back inside, nearly thirty minutes later. His eyes just as shadowed and dark as Techno feels, and there’s stubble on his chin that won’t go away.

“Morning,” Techno mutters. He closes the back door behind him and locks it firmly.

Phil pours himself a generous cup of coffee, and in testament to every single morning Techno has experienced with his father, takes his coffee the same way— one dollop of half and half, two sugars. It’s the same without fail, and something about it warms Techno’s heart slightly.

No matter how much their house changes, and how many people return or leave, there’s always going to be little constants that remain the same. Their inability to remember to clean out the lint filter in the dryer until all of them are dangerously close to setting a fire anytime they do their laundry. The way they all take their coffee in the morning, all individual and distinct. The way Tommy always arranged the table fruit in the bowl so all the apples face upright, regardless of who goes shopping and who unpacks groceries. The way Phil always pries the windows half-open in the summer, instead of turning on the air conditioning, just to spite the summer heat.

“Did Tommy talk to you last night?” Phil says, and he’s careful to not show much interest at all, even though Techno can tell the question has been eating away at him.

True to his word, Techno covers for his little brother. “No,” he says. “He’s probably still asleep.”

Phil laughs. “If he’s not awake by eleven I’ll go and wake him up. But...” He glances at the clock that hangs on their kitchen wall, “I don’t know. He needs his sleep, doesn’t he?”

Techno takes a long sip of coffee and doesn’t deign to respond.

Phil stares at the clock for a minute longer. Techno can tell that whatever he’s thinking about isn’t really the time at all.

“I’ll wake him up at ten,” Phil decides.

Techno makes a mental note to send Tommy the time he needs to be back in bed and changed into pajamas. He’ll do that as soon as this conversation is over, then.

“Maybe I should wake him up sooner,” Phil muses out loud.

With a spike of alarm, Techno says, “I think he can sleep in.”

“Isn’t everyone else already up?”

“We’re both early risers,” Techno points out, “And Wilbur is on Pacific time. He’s bound to be awake too.”

Wilbur’s presence emerges into their conversation, despite being on the other side of the house and completely oblivious to everything that’s happening. He fills a gap that was left empty for so long, but in such a strange way. None of them know how to adjust to this. They don’t know how to begin to mend what was left broken.

It’s like the proverbs say. Sweeping glass under the rug will only leave someone with a bloody sock. It will never solve anything.

When Phil doesn’t respond, Techno says, “Dad,” and waits until his father’s troubled gaze meets his before continuing, “It’s only been a few days. We’ll have time to work everything out.”

“I know,” Phil says, and his chest rises and falls, “I know.”

Techno wonders if Phil ever regrets it, despite all his insistence that he doesn’t. It has to be miserable to raise three teenage boys at the same time, especially three with a penchant for trouble. Even though things have evened out now— does he ever wish that their family was different? That he could go backwards in time and undo what’s already been done?

“I think everyone just needs to take a break,” Techno continues, and does his best to push away the thoughts prying at his mind. “Everyone hasn’t been at home together in so long. I can’t wait for our first big argument.”

Phil huffs. His smile is warm. “You don’t think we’ve already had one?”

“Nah,” Techno says. “Think: family board game nights. *Those* kinds of arguments.”

Phil laughs, brighter this time, as clear as a bell. “I remember Wilbur and I having to drag you and Tommy apart.”

“He *cheated*,” Techno protests instantly.

“Maybe we should play Monopoly again.”

“It’s like you want the entire house to burn down.”

Phil claps a hand on his shoulder. “I think we’re all adults. We can manage it.”

Techno eyes him dubiously. “Sometimes I feel like you don’t know us at all.”

“Tommy might throw a few hotels,” Phil admits.

“Are you kidding? He’d flip the board.”

Phil laughs again, and the tension that was building in the kitchen, a pressurized can about to explode, begins to decrease. Techno imagines a helium balloon leaking air, hissing slowly to the floor. His shoulders release some of their tension, as well. He’s sure Phil notices the change as well.

“Thank you for having a good head on your shoulders,” Phil says, and it’s obvious that he feels slightly embarrassed for worrying so much, and relieved that he still has at least one normal son who he can talk to. Two of his he’s painfully out of touch with. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Tech.”

Techno swallows.

The words sound strange in his mouth when he says, “Thanks, Dad.”

True to his word, Phil knocks on Tommy’s door a few hours later. Techno listens surreptitiously and prays that Tommy was smart enough to sneak in through the window silently, and is pleased to find that his little brother is “fast asleep” and only blearily waking up when Phil calls his name. He shoots Techno two thumbs-up as he pushes his way out into the kitchen, hair ruffled.

Tommy meanders through the cabinets, open and closing things at random. He looks much happier than he did a few mornings ago, back when he was stuck inside with only his family for company. Even though Techno can’t tell Phil what happened, or what he’s up to, he can tell that sneaking out to see Tubbo has improved Tommy’s mood exponentially.

In fact, Tommy is jovial enough to proclaim, in a tone far bigger than he is, “Pass me the coffee, Tech.”

Tommy hates coffee. He despises it. Techno knows this, because he only drinks it when he wants to act like more of an adult.

“Curious that you’re so tired,” Techno says blandly. “Since you slept in so late.”

Tommy takes the pot from his hands and manages to shoulder-check Techno at the same time. Falsely, he says, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Whatever,” Techno sighs, and he watches as Tommy carefully pulls himself a mug of some of the strongest brew in the Watson household. “Cream or sugar?”

“I’ll drink it black, thanks,” Tommy says, supremely arrogant.

“Right.”

“People at college drink their coffee black all the time.”

“Speaking of college,” Techno says, “When are you planning on telling me what happened?”

Tommy takes a large gulp, and his face screws up in disgust. Techno snorts. With a massive effort Tommy swallows, and then holds his hand out for the flavored creamer that Techno already has waiting.

“Never,” Tommy says, and tops his coffee off with more creamer than brew. “I don’t think you deserve to know.”

“I’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Surely,” Tommy says. “You’re annoying like that.”

“It would make it easier if you just told me upfront,” Techno points out.

“I thought,” Tommy says, with an air of magnanimity, “That dad said you should be patient and wait for me to tell you myself.”

“You’re such a gremlin,” Techno says. “You listened to our conversation?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to listen to Wilbur yelling at me all the time,” Tommy grouses. “I picked the lesser of two evils.”

“Wil isn’t evil.”

“Feels like it sometimes.”

Techno nudges him. “Take it back.”

Tommy huffs. He crosses his arms impatiently. “No.”

“He could be listening, you know?”

Overconfidently: “He’s not.”

“You’re too stubborn for your own good, you know?”

“I know,” Tommy sighs, edging on the melodramatic. “That’s what my professors told me, too.”

“Seems like they got one thing right about you, then.”

Techno waits for a smile, but nothing comes. Tommy stares moodily into the milky coffee in his mug and sets his jaw. He has that same expression on—the one he wears right before he’s about to make a terrible decision.

“What are you thinking?” Techno asks quietly.

“I’m thinking I’m going to kick Wilbur’s ass as soon as I’m taller than him.”

“Good luck,” Techno says. “I think your growth spurts are over, unfortunately.”

“I’ll wear high heels.”

An amused laugh bubbles from Techno’s throat. “I’ll take a video of you falling on your ass, then.”

Tommy shoots him an irritated look. “God, you and Wil are just the same.”

“No,” Techno instantly objects, “We’re not. Don’t you dare say that.”

“You both make fun of me,” Tommy says, and ticks the things off on his fingers, one by one, “You both write things for a living, you both went to college—”

“You went to college too,” Techno points out, and before his mouth can clamp shut, he says, “For about a week, that is.”

Tommy glowers. “It was two weeks, and you don’t even know what happened.”

“So tell me,” Techno questions, and he waits until Tommy makes eye contact with him before continuing, “Will you *ever* tell me?”

Tommy glares down at the floor.

Finally, he says, “I need some air.”

Techno follows him out onto the back porch for the second time in a morning. The morning mist has long since burned off. Tommy places his coffee mug on the stairs, and takes a seat, knees held to his chest. He directs his gaze out towards the garden, wild and untamed.

Both Phil and Techno have been slacking on keeping up with it. Now, the tomato vines sprawl out of control, climbing their ways up the trellis and onto the neighbor’s fences. The basil has sprung up in places where it shouldn’t be, patches in between the chives and the wild strawberries that make summertime sweeter than sugar. The zucchini is wild and overgrown, and the buds of vegetables are just beginning to grow ripe underneath the hang of massive, green leaves.

“Well?” Techno persists, once it’s apparent that Tommy isn’t going to continue the conversation, “How bad was it?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Did you set something on fire?”

“No.”

“Commit plagiarism?”

Tommy glares. “No.”

“Get in a fistfight with a professor?”

A pause. “No.”

Techno hums. “So you *did* get in a fistfight.”

“I’m not going to tell you,” Tommy says incensed, and then immediately after, “Maybe. Eventually. I don’t know.”

Techno is smart enough to tell when he’s struck a nerve. So he shrugs. “That’s good enough for me.”

Tommy fidgets at his side, brimming with nervous energy. He asks, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Techno shrugs. The height of his impassivity feels wrong to explain, and there’s no good way to fit it into easily understandable words. Instead, all he says is, “You’re my brother, right?”

Tommy nods, strangled and tight.

“Brother,” he mutters, half lost in thought. “What a stupid fucking idea.”

Across from him, tomato vines crawl up the trellis, vibrant and flourishing and green. Techno, again, is reminded that he needs to cut them back. Maybe he’ll drag Phil to do that with him this afternoon, if they’re both done with their work for the day.

“You know,” Techno says awkwardly, “He still cares about you. Even if he’s angry.”

“I don’t want to talk about him anymore,” Tommy says.

The coffee cup, half drunk, only there to show how much of an adult his little brother is, has gone cold.

“What do you want to talk about?”

Tommy is quiet for a suspicious amount of time. Long enough that Techno glances over at him in concern, partially worried, partially wondering.

What happened? he thinks. *What happened to my little brother?*

“Tubbo,” Tommy says, clearing his throat. “I want to talk about Tubbo.”

“Alright,” Techno breathes. “Tell me about him.”

Tommy clears his throat.

He talks until his voice goes hoarse.

The next morning, unfortunately, is not as calm as the one before.

Wilbur emerges from his room only a few moments after Techno does. He looks exhausted, like the bags underneath his eyes are heavier than anvils, pulling him further down.

“Good morning,” Wilbur says.

“Good morning,” Techno returns, and pushes past him to get to the fridge.

“You’re up early.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Techno says brusquely. He wrenches open the fridge door and retrieves a carton of cream, which he shakes and then sniffs to check that it’s still good. When he deems it to his satisfaction, he pours a generous amount of it into his mug.

“I always thought you were more of a tea person,” Wilbur comments.

“A lot has changed in the last few years,” Techno says.

He’s bristling. He doesn’t know why.

Wilbur swallows down whatever he was intending to say and gestures to the pot. “Can I have some?”

“It’s not a good brew.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Whatever, then,” Techno says, and Wilbur pours himself a cup. He drinks his black. It makes Techno’s lip curl.

Wilbur takes two slow sips, lips pressed together, and he says, “Did Phil never teach you how to make a decent cup of coffee?”

Drinking his own cup, Techno responds, “Not like Phil’s coffee is much better.”

“Good thing I can teach you, then,” Wilbur jokes. “I have the time, right?”

Techno takes another sip of coffee and doesn’t bother responding. The edges of Wilbur’s mouth slip and fall, and he swallows, blinks, before continuing.

Wilbur clears his throat. “Well? Any plans for today?”

There’s another call with his landlord, because he should be moving into the apartment in about a month. He has about twenty pages of editing to go through for the literary review he works for, and the deadline is in two days. He has to deal with Tommy’s attitude, and somehow work out a way to get the story from him. There are so many things to do and only so many hours in the day.

“I’m going grocery shopping,” Techno says instead. Let everything else rot.

“Could I join?”

“If you want.”

The barest smile flickers across Wilbur’s face. “So you’ve finally got your license, then?”

“No, I break the law every time I do something,” Techno deadpans.

“Same old Techno,” Wilbur says genially.

“Sure,” Techno says coolly. “Same old me.”

Wilbur’s tentative smile fades. It’s painfully clear that he doesn’t know what to say to make the two of them go back to normal.

Wilbur doesn’t miss a beat, though. “Whatever time you’re going, just let me know.”

“Not going to act as Tommy’s personal therapist?”

The words slip out before Techno means to say them, and he wishes he could take them back.

“I didn’t come back home just for Tommy, you know,” Wilbur says. “There’s two other people in this family.”

“That explains so much,” Techno says dryly. “It certainly explains why you showed up to my college graduation.”

Wilbur winces. So does Techno. That may have been a low blow.

“You know I apologized for that.”

Techno does know. He remembers the email. Short, bare, and cold. It had briefly mentioned Phil forwarding a video of Techno crossing the stage to him, and a brief congratulations on finally managing to graduate. Techno had taken one look at it and deleted it.

“That really made a difference, huh?”

Wilbur presses his lips together and looks into the dark abysses of his own mug. Quietly, he says, “I’m just doing my best here. I’d appreciate some help.”

Techno flicks his eyes over him, only for the briefest moment. He looks so similar and so different. The same dimples are curved into his cheeks whenever he smiles. His eyes, honey brown in the sunlight, are still the same. Even his hair is curly and long, falling over his forehead.

“Don’t expect it to come from me, then,” Techno says. His heart burns, and stubbornly, he ignores it.

He crosses over to the sink and dumps the last vestiges of his coffee down the drain. It swirls, milky and brown, and he washes it down. Wilbur still stands there, leaning against the counter, looking at a loss for words.

“Whenever you’re ready to go shopping, tell me,” Techno says, at the edge of the kitchen and the hallway.

Wilbur nods.

Techno rounds the corner and goes back to his room. It’s directly across from Wilbur’s, and inside, he can see the shadowy scatterings of Wilbur’s belongings. Apparently he’s just as messy as he used to be, then. Not much has changed.

For some reason, it feels like he’s won that argument. Even though there was no argument to win at all.

A half hour later, Techno’s hair is freshly washed and damp. The hot water from the shower tugs out the knots in his back with slim fingers. Dimly Techno thinks that this is the bathroom he’ll have to share with Wilbur, now, and he should try and keep it a little more clean.

Wilbur appears at the doorway as Techno combs through his hair.

“Did you dye it?”

“A while ago,” Techno says; the last bits of the pink are still fading from his hair. It had taken about two years for the impulsive dye job to grow back out, and Techno swears that he’ll never dye his hair again because of all the trouble it took.

Wilbur reaches out with a hand, tugs on a strand. Techno doesn’t have the heart to tell Wilbur to stop. “What color was it?”

“Pink.”

“I’m sure it looked nice.”

Techno redirects his attention to the mirror. It’s clouded over with steam. Both he and Wilbur look like shapeless masses in the mist.

“Whatever,” he says. “I’ll grab Tommy and we’ll go.”

Techno stops at Tommy's door and knocks carefully. He's a little surprised that his younger brother is still asleep—it's already nine in the morning. Shouldn't he be up? He knocks louder at the doorway, and when Tommy's sleeping form doesn't budge, Techno sighs, "Tommy. Wake up."

Tommy doesn't move.

"Tommy," Techno says again, clearer this time, and Tommy shifts. He scrubs a hand over his face, squeezes his eyes shut when Techno is cruel enough to flick the lights on at full brightness.

"Fuck off," Tommy scowls, and raises a feeble hand in defense.

"Come on," Techno says, and nudges Tommy's mattress. "Get up. We're going grocery shopping."

Finally Techno manages to get Tommy to sit up in bed. He grimaces, hair sticking up every direction, shirt pulled halfway up his ribcage.

"It's too early for this."

"It's eight," Techno says unapologetically. "You got up at six yesterday. Wilbur is going too, come on."

Tommy tugs down his shirt. He glances at the doorway, like he's expecting to see his other brother standing behind Techno. "Then I'm not going."

"Stop being a baby."

"I'm not being a baby," he mutters.

"Yes you are," Techno says. "You're acting like a child."

Tommy scowls. "Excuse me if I don't want to hear about how much of a fuck up I am for the next two hours, thank you very much."

Techno heaves a sigh. "You get expelled and then you get upset when people talk about it. Grow. Up."

He enunciates every last word with a kick to Tommy's bed frame. Tommy swings his legs out of bed and raises a sleepy middle finger to Techno.

Techno has very little sympathy for Tommy, and he doesn't bother hanging around. "Come to the kitchen when you're ready. Wilbur and I are waiting."

"Wilbur and I," Tommy sneers, "*Wilbur and I* are waiting, *Wilbur and I* are—"

Techno slams the door on him. He leans against the wall and focuses on taking several deep breaths, while Tommy moves around inside, presumably pulling on actual clothes.

He can hear Wilbur rummaging around in the kitchen. He can see Phil's silhouette in the yard, taking a break. He can hear Tommy muttering to himself. He can taste the coffee on his tongue, the aftertaste of mint toothpaste, the sweet scent of his shampoo, and tries painfully to ground himself in the moment.

It all feels so similar. So similar and yet so different.

Tommy emerges a few minutes later, and he heads directly to the kitchen. Wilbur is leaning against the counter, on his second cup of coffee. The pot is half empty at this point. Tommy plonks

himself down with a bowl of cereal and milk and determinedly does not look at Wilbur at all.

“Hi,” Wilbur says, as though he and Tommy hadn’t gotten into a fierce shouting match the night before. “How are you?”

Tommy doesn’t respond.

“He’s in a mood,” Techno says. “Give him a few minutes, he’ll snap out of it.”

“I hate you,” Tommy mutters, through a mouthful of sugar and milk. “I hate the both of you.”

“This is family bonding,” Techno says dryly. “The least you can do is participate in some of it.”

“I hate family bonding.”

“You hate it because you treat everything like a competition,” Techno says.

“I hate you,” Tommy mutters.

“I think it’ll be nice,” Wilbur says diplomatically.

“You don’t have to lie to yourself.”

Wilbur huffs. He slouches and crosses his arms over his chest in a way that’s remarkably teenager-like of him. “Excuse me for trying my best.”

“You’re excused,” Tommy mutters, and Techno flicks his forehead.

Techno unlocks the car doors as soon as Tommy is done and his shoes are slipped on. Upon leaving the front door, Wilbur slides out this ridiculous pair of sunglasses from his jacket pocket. They’re wide and bug-eyed, and Tommy takes one look at them and bursts out laughing.

“Wil,” he says, in between fits of giggles, “This is the smallest town this close to the coast. Everyone here knows you. No one gives a damn.”

“I suppose,” Wilbur mutters, and he looks slightly chastised when he takes them off and sticks them in his pocket.

Techno slides into the driver’s seat. Tommy hops into the passenger seat before Wilbur has the opportunity to take it, and Techno jerks his thumb at the backseat.

“Too slow,” he says. “Get in.”

“I’m taller than the both of you,” he complains, “I should be in the front.”

“I’m taller than Tech,” Tommy says gleefully, “Doesn’t mean that I should be driving.”

“You can’t even drive yet.”

Tommy nods sagely. “I failed my test three times.”

Techno sighs. “You should never go on the streets.”

In response, Tommy kicks his heels up on the dashboard, dislodging the fine layer of dust that’s lying there. “Just go already, won’t you?”

“Feet off the dashboard,” Techno says, and when Tommy finally complies, spurs the tiny sedan

into motion.

For a moment, it feels like it's just the three of them. The last time all three of them were together was for Wilbur's college graduation, back when he was barely twenty-one, and Tommy was only thirteen. Techno was somewhere firmly in between, awkwardly sandwiched between the two. He remembers all three of them sitting in a row, all the way in the front, May sun beating down onto their heads. It was all so exciting. It was all so fun.

When they arrive, Wilbur takes a cart from the line, and Techno fishes out the crumpled receipt from last time (of which he's written the shopping list for today on the back). Tommy peeks over at it— he's always been the only person able to read Techno's handwriting.

"Chips, salsa, tortilla, lettuce, eggs," he reads. "I'm on that. Wilbur, grab the next five things."

Again, Wilbur exchanges glances with Techno, who only shrugs. He has no sympathy for people who abandon their families.

Is that too harsh of a thing to think?

"Wil, we'll grab things together," he says. "Tommy needs to run around and get some energy out."

"I'm not a kid," Tommy says sullenly.

Wilbur pushes on his shoulder lightly. "Go on."

Tommy wrinkles his nose, but he disappears around the next aisle before they have a chance to say another word.

"Is this your first time grocery shopping in years?" Techno asks amusedly.

The look Wilbur gives him is less amused. "You're not funny."

"I laughed," Techno says. "Tommy would have laughed."

"Tommy's sense of humor is shit."

"I think he's funny," Techno says coldly.

"He's annoying," Wilbur jokes, and Techno can see so clearly what he's trying to do. Back when they were in high school, and Tommy was just in elementary school, they would make fun of him together over geometry homework. Back when it was easy to joke like that, and there were no consequences to it.

But Tommy is Techno's brother. And he's never been one for setting boundaries and gatekeeping, but there's something so strange about Wilbur trying to make the same jokes that they did ten years ago.

Wilbur lost the right to make jokes about Tommy five years ago, the minute he boarded that plane flight.

"He's not annoying," Techno says harshly. "Go grab more cornflakes. We're running low."

Wilbur presses his lips together and goes. Techno scrolls down the rest of the list. Heavy cream, two percent milk, one gallon of it. More cheddar cheese.

Wilbur returns. "I didn't mean to push."

You didn't mean to do a lot of things, Techno wants to snap.

“Whatever,” he says instead.

Techno doesn't even know what he wants to hear from that. He doesn't know whether he wants Wilbur to say *it's not okay* or *it's not whatever* or *I'm sorry for laughing at him* or *I'm sorry for leaving you out*. But all he does is remain silent, and so all Techno does is push the cart down another aisle.

Tommy returns, out of breath, a few moments later. He's like a puppy, full of endless energy.

“I got everything,” he pants. “Is there anything left to get?”

Wordlessly Techno passes him the list. Wilbur, in the meanwhile, pulls his phone out of his pocket. He doesn't seem at all interested in whatever's going on, though, and puts it away.

“Snacks,” Techno says, once Tommy passes him the list back. “Get whatever you want.”

Tommy nods, and darts off again.

“You're giving him free range over snacks?” Wilbur mutters, and his lip curls. “We're going to be eating barbecue chips for the next ten years.”

“Tommy likes sour cream and onion more.”

“That's even worse.”

“Sorry your taste is so shit,” Techno says blandly. “Hope you get better soon.”

Wilbur's eyes narrow. “Why are you being so antagonistic?”

“I'm not being antagonistic.”

“You've been rude to me at every turn and all I'm trying to do is bring things back to normal,”

The emotion in Techno's chest threatens to boil over, heated and dark, and he keeps his voice cool. “Back to normal? That's rich, coming from you.”

Incensed: “I didn't—”

“I'm back,” Tommy says, dumping armfuls of shiny, metallic bags into the cart. “Is that everything we need?”

Wilbur clamps his mouth shut, sticks his hands into his pockets, and Techno bites down the words rising like bile in the back of his throat.

“We're good,” Techno says, and Tommy frowns at his tone of voice. “Let's go check out.”

Tommy glances between the two of them, and he's obviously getting the sense that he interrupted something important. Slowly, he asks, “Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” Wilbur says, at the same time Techno says flatly, “Peachy.”

Tommy's eyebrows shoot up. “Alright. Message received loud and clear, big men. Let's go check out.”

Wilbur's presence is vivid and angry. Tommy's is cloistered off and irritated. Techno is sure he's a mix of the two.

It takes barely fifteen minutes for the three of them to check out and bag their groceries. They drive home in complete, absolute silence.

Techno wonders where it all went wrong.

Two afternoons later, Techno finds himself sitting on the porch steps.

Around seven years ago, it snowed so much that the deck collapsed. That was the winter and subsequent spring where Phil taught Techno how to use power tools (every seventeen year old needs to learn how to use a drill, right?) and they fixed the deck together. Absentmindedly, Techno rubs a hand over one of the planks.

It would have been so much easier for them to just hire someone to fix it for them. But Techno was eager and excited, and Phil didn't mind so much, and besides, now it's fixed. It's lasted for half a decade, at this point. Clearly, they did something right.

Techno blows a bubble, pops it, and then sets out to blow another one again.

He doesn't even register that Tommy has taken a seat next to him until he shifts, too close for Techno to be any more oblivious.

"You aren't smoking," Tommy notes.

Techno huffs. He gestures to the cardboard pack at his side. "Nicotine gum."

"Hope the habit sticks."

"Very funny."

"What can I say? I'm the funniest person in this house, hands down."

"Wonderful," Techno murmurs, and focuses on the sharp taste of mint in his mouth. It doesn't do much to take the edge off his cravings.

"Seriously, though," Tommy says, and he nudges Techno's hip, "It's good to see you quitting."

"They'll kill me," Techno parrots. "You and everyone else."

Tommy grins again, though it's a little more half-hearted. "Keep it up, I guess."

Techno blows another bubble and it pops, satisfying and quick. "Any plans for the rest of this semester?"

Tommy's gaze goes down to his fingers, and he picks at them. A terrible habit that all three of the brothers share. "I don't know. Phil wants me to take community classes, just so I'm not sitting at home doing nothing. Wilbur told me to get a job so at least I would be useful."

Techno pauses. "He said that?"

Tommy shrugs, energy sapping out of him. “I guess you didn’t hear our full argument, but it, uh. It wasn’t pretty.”

“Hm.”

“He shouted,” Tommy says, “A lot.”

“On the bright side,” Techno tries, “I don’t see any reason to yell at you.”

“I kind of wish you would.”

“If you really wanted me to, I could.”

Tommy laughs, choked. “Not really. Wilbur was bad enough.”

Techno considers that. He thinks about how it must hurt to know that the only reason Wilbur came back was because Tommy fucked up so dramatically. What does that say about the rest of them, huh?

As if reading his mind, Tommy continues. His voice is hushed. “What kind of brother comes back for this and not for my damn graduation?”

Wilbur had been on video call in Phil’s hands as Tommy crossed the stage. Tommy had bawled his eyes out in Techno’s room later that night.

“Wilbur is an idiot,” Techno says. “He’s the biggest idiot of all time. Hey, Toms, listen to me—*listen* to me.”

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut and buries his face in his hands.

“Wilbur has fucked up so much more than you have,” Techno says, and waits until Tommy gives him a muffled, pitiful nod. “I don’t care how much you look up to him. He’s not your role model. He shouldn’t be.”

“I know,” Tommy mumbles. “I hate him.”

Techno thinks about two mugs of coffee, one black, one sweetened. He thinks about blue graduation gowns and the stamp of time on their faces, ever changing. He thinks about snow falling in the winter and older, capable hands braiding his hair when it was longer. He thinks about everything and anything and opens his mouth, only to find that he’s unable to mutter the words *I hate him too* back to Tommy.

“He’ll get better,” Techno says.

I hope so goes unspoken.

Tommy fills it in for him.

They sit there in silence and watch the cars pass on the street. Afternoon slowly changes into the inky blue of evening.

“You know what?” Tommy bursts, “I’ve had enough of sitting at home and doing nothing.”

Techno tilts his head at him curiously. “You’re still grounded for another two weeks.”

“Fuck it,” Tommy says. “I’m already going to be at home, I might as well do something while

you're still here too."

Tommy's enthusiasm piques Techno's interest. "Alright. Like what?"

"Like..." Tommy considers it. "Like going trespassing. Or graffiti something. Or—"

"No."

"Or go to a movie," Tommy says, immediately changing tack, "Or go get shitty pizza together or do something interesting. Just the two of us."

"No Phil?" Techno can't stop himself from asking.

"He's the one who grounded me in the first place. For a college graduate, you sure can be stupid sometimes."

"Maybe you're not missing anything by not going to college," Techno jokes, only half serious. "Look how I ended up, right?"

Tommy lets out a half-hearted laugh but doesn't respond for another minute, until finally: "So what are we doing?"

The outline of the sedan's car keys press against Techno's leg, sharp and hard. "A drive?"

"Really?"

"Did you not think I was going to say yes?"

"I wasn't sure."

Techno pushes himself up and pulls the car keys out of his pocket. "Are you coming or not?"

A grin flashes across Tommy's face, and tension slumps from his shoulders, like he's sitting up straight for the first time in days. "Fuck yes."

Tommy kicks his feet up in the passenger seat, and Techno doesn't tell him to stop. Instead, Techno only pulls smoothly out into the street. The remnants of the afternoon are low and golden, and there's enough clouds that people aren't walking around. He stares at the road ahead and thinks about where Tommy wants to go, what would be best.

"This is nice," Tommy sighs, and tilts his seat back further. "Where are we going, by the way?"

"Undecided," Techno says. "Where do you want to go?"

"The freeway," Tommy says, without any preamble. "As fast as you can go."

Techno raises an eyebrow, but takes the next right turn, towards the closest highway. Tommy rolls down the window. As soon as he hits the on ramp, and merges all the way to the left, Tommy whoops at the top of his lungs.

"Yes!" he shouts, louder than the wind rushing through his hair, louder than the buffeting sound, louder than the cars around them. He whoops again. A car honks at them and swerves. Tommy collapses into a fit of giggles, hair windswept and tangled.

Without looking, Techno tugs on his shirt sleeve. "Stop leaning out of the car."

Tommy leans back in. “Go faster.”

Techno glances at the speedometer. It’s a 60 MPH speed limit, and he’s going seventy. But Techno’s driven this road for years now, and he knows there will be no cops in front of him. Not for the next ten miles, at least.

He presses down on the gas pedal. Tommy shouts, a nearly inaudible scream, and rolls down his window further. Techno can hardly hear him. He can hardly hear himself. The only thing he can hear is his pulse, screaming in his ears, louder than any drumbeat.

It lasts for a second, a minute, an hour, a lifetime, and finally Techno slows down. Tommy’s hair looks like someone tugged hands through it. Techno fights to get air into his lungs.

“You know,” Tommy says breathlessly, and his grin is ear-splitting, “You’re the coolest older brother I’ve ever had.”

Techno feels like his heart is going to burst in two.

With the most impassive expression he can manage, Techno says, “You’re the coolest little brother I’ve ever had.”

A red thread, tying the two of them to each other. Sewn through the chambers of their hearts.

“Aw, Tech,” Tommy teases, and elbows him, “You’re going all soft on me.”

The moment dissipates. Techno shoots him a glance, and Tommy laughs. Techno commits the sound of Tommy's laugh to his memory.

The drive back home is quick and silent. Music blasts from the radio while Tommy attempts to comb his hair back into something normal. They stop at a Jack in the Box drive through. Tommy gets a milkshake and fries and mixes the flavors together, which Techno turns up his nose at.

Techno turns the radio down as they pull into the driveway again. From inside, yellow light pours through the windows. They sit in silence for a moment. Neither of them are willing to go back inside.

“Anytime you need to escape,” Techno says quietly, “You can come to me.”

Tommy doesn't respond.

“You know that, right?”

He stares at the streetlights, shining through the evening mist. Tommy doesn't respond for a long, long time.

“Yeah,” he says eventually, voice wet and choked. “I know.”

as always if you enjoyed, please leave kudos/comments, i really appreciate them!! <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

After an enlightening conversation with Tommy, Techno seeks out Wilbur as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur is on a phone call when the two of them go back inside.

Tommy goes around the back to sneak into his room— he always leaves the window cracked, so he can wriggle in without alerting anyone that he’s breaking his house arrest. Techno, however, heads directly to his room, still windswept and breathless. He pauses when he sees Wilbur, pacing back and forth across from him, nearly wearing holes into his carpet.

“You’re right,” Wilbur says into the phone, “Stop saying— it’s only for a few weeks. I’ll be back soon.”

He turns as he’s pacing, and spots Techno standing in the doorway. He raises a finger to his lips, and Techno gets the memo. Be quiet.

“I know,” Wilbur snaps, at one point, “Don’t you think I wish I was there, with all of you? I’m working long distance, this is the best I can do.”

He grips his hair with one hand, a bad habit that Techno thought he had helped Wilbur to break. He mutters *goodbye, Niki, I’ll call you tomorrow* and hangs up the line. Techno cocks his head curiously.

“Who’s Niki?”

“A friend of mine.”

“Really?”

Wilbur amends, “We’re working on a project together. We think it’ll become something big.”

“Ah,” Techno nods.

“If we move fast, we could get the pitch out in a few weeks.”

“Ah,” Techno says again.

“It would be a big deal for my career,” Wilbur says, and he runs a hand through his hair feverishly, “It could be a really big deal.”

“So even on your break, you’re still working,” Techno summarizes.

Wilbur presses his lips together and doesn’t respond.

“You came home and you aren’t even giving yourself time to spend with your family.”

“That’s not what’s happening.”

Techno gestures to the phone in his hand. “It seems like it.”

“Obviously, I can’t just abandon my work,” Wilbur says uncomprehendingly. “Did you think I was just taking a break for a month?”

“Three weeks,” Techno says.

“Besides, you’re doing work too,” Wilbur says.

“That’s an unfair comparison and you know it.”

Techno knows that he’s pushing Wilbur’s buttons. He knows that he’s exacerbating an already existing problem. But he’s riding on the high of Tommy confessing that he’s cool— not just *cool*, but the *coolest*— which means so much more than Tommy could have ever anticipated.

Wilbur glares at him, as if he’s reading his thoughts. “At least I’m helping Tommy.”

You’re not goes unspoken, but Techno feels it like a punch to the gut.

“So you’re just here for Tommy, then,” he says.

Wilbur pauses. His voice is awfully quiet. “Well, he’s— one of the reasons.”

“And the others?”

Wilbur, for a moment, looks like he’s going to say something. Something in his eyes is a little softer, a little brighter.

Then, guarded: “I don’t have time for an interrogation. I have work to do.”

Techno gives him a withering look. “Tell me about your pitch, then.”

“I can’t say much,” Wilbur says. “It’s confidential.”

“Tell me what you can.”

“I’ll rephrase,” Wilbur says. “It’s *all* confidential.”

“Tell me something that’s not confidential. Anything at all.”

Techno knows that he’s getting dangerously close to pleading, and Wilbur seems to recognize this too, because pieces of his exterior melt away. He breathes, says, “I have so much to do.”

Techno considers this for a moment, and extends a hand. “Come on.”

“What?”

He’s already had his emotional conversation with Tommy for the night, time to talk with Wilbur as well. “We’re going on a walk. Come with me.”

“It’s night,” Wilbur says uncomprehendingly.

“So?” Techno shrugs. “That’s never stopped you before.”

“I…”

Wilbur glances down at the phone in his hand and back up at Techno. In the dim lights of his room, it's easy to see how dark the bags under his eyes are.

Come on, Techno thinks, say yes. Take my hand.

"Only for a few minutes."

It's better than a no.

"Excellent," Techno says, and knows that those few minutes will likely transform into an hour. "Get your shoes and your coat, we're going now."

"Only for a few minutes," Wilbur repeats, even though he's pulling on that hideous orange coat that glows under the moonlight, cramming a dark beanie onto his head, "I don't have much time to spare, you know that."

"A few minutes," Techno says, and tugs his older brother out of the door, "I promise."

At the playground after dark, it's very easy to pretend that it's just the two of them five years ago, marked out in the dark. Back when Wilbur and Techno were practically inseparable, tied at the hip, two parts of one whole.

"Why'd you drag me out here again?"

"Wanted to talk."

"About what?"

"You brought up Tommy first. Why don't you talk about him?"

Wilbur's frown only deepens. "What are you playing at?"

"He hates you, you know."

Wilbur turns his eyes towards the sidewalk, stuffs his hands into his pockets. He doesn't respond for a moment.

"I expected that," he says.

"You really let him down."

"I *know* that," Wilbur says, irritated, "What are you, my therapist?"

"Clearly *someone* has to be your therapist," Techno says plainly. "Doesn't seem like you have one for yourself."

"If you're just here to talk about all of my failings as an older brother," Wilbur says, "Then I don't want to be here at all."

Wilbur has never managed to fit the role of older brother as well as he should have. For Techno, it's always been a skin he can slip on without worry. But it's always seemed like Wilbur has

wanted to be younger. That's why he went into film, after all. How else can he tell fairy tales while still being an adult?

"I just think someone needs to knock some sense into you," Techno says plainly.

"Thanks," Wilbur mutters, dour. "Well, consider the sense knocked in, alright?"

He glances around at the playground. It's the one in the elementary school, painting bright blue and orange, eye-catching colors that pop for miles around. It's a popular hangout spot for teens. Techno knows that intimately.

"So," Wilbur says, "Any reason we're out here in particular?"

Techno reaches for the first rung of the ladder.

"Come on," he says, and beckons with his free hand. "Follow."

Obligingly, Wilbur does. Techno clammers all the way to the top, to the highest point, and he swings his legs off the side. Wilbur sits next to him, close enough to feel body heat, far enough that there's a careful inch of space between them. Despite never being one for the cold, Wilbur always runs hot.

"I remember playing here as a kid," Wilbur says suddenly. "I spent all my afternoons here."

"I remember you came here even when it snowed," Techno agrees. "Didn't Phil come looking for you?"

"I left my coat at home. He wanted to make me wear it."

"That was the first time I got to sit in the front seat," Techno says, and the memory comes back with startling clarity. Snow, swirling down from a pure white sky. Sticking to the soles of his winter boots. Holding Phil's hand. Looking back on it, maybe a ten year old shouldn't have been sitting in the front seat, but Phil didn't protest, and so Techno pulled on his mittens and scarves and hopped right in. It was warm and safe and comforting.

"Can't believe that," Wilbur says, half seriously. "Dad didn't let me sit in the front until I was thirteen."

"Can't help it if I'm the favorite," Techno jokes.

Wilbur raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

Ah. Techno looks down. That's always been a point of contention in their family, hasn't it?

"It's just because I got here first," Techno says. "I've been here the longest."

"So you *do* think he has favorites."

Wilbur's voice is flat.

"Why are you trying to corner me into admitting something?" Techno says, exasperated, like that'll solve anything. "He's known me the longest, that's no one's fault."

"You know," Wilbur says, "I remember when I first met you."

It's almost a non-sequitur, if Techno doesn't know Wilbur so well.

Techno remembers that moment too. He was just a kid, only six. Wilbur was nine, and painfully taller than him by a few inches— which was a trend that would continue for the rest of their life. He was hunched over in a dark jacket too big for him. He didn't trust Phil, not at all, and Techno remembers being confused as to why.

All Techno's life, the only thing he's known is Phil. He's never known anything else. He has vague memories of a time before, but they blend into colors, shapes and scenes that he isn't sure are even real.

"You were smaller," Wilbur says. "And a lot shorter."

"I grew up," Techno says. "You did, too."

"Growing up," Wilbur says, "Is very strange."

"Did you ever think you would end up here?"

"In my dreams," Wilbur breathes, "But I think all of those ended up coming true."

Techno thinks about his childhood dreams, scrawled on the backs of his kindergarten papers. *What do you want to be when you grow up? I want to be an astronaut. I want to be the president. I want to be a rockstar. I want to be a famous movie director.*

Wilbur is silent, tremulous, and Techno feels like he's on the verge of something dramatic and wild and larger than himself.

"The peach tree," Wilbur says eventually, voice small, "Is it still here?"

They're both thinking of the same memory. Techno knows.

A July night, humid and damp. Phil lifting them up to pluck peaches from the tree. Eating them, juice running down their chins, sticky and sweet. Tommy methodically sorting them into *good* and *bad*, the kind of sorting only a child can do. A smile, a laugh. Summer paper lanterns, hung up from lampposts.

"No," Techno says. "It's gone."

"Shame," Wilbur says. "I liked that tree."

"Me too," Techno says.

The night falls quiet. A lightning bug, flitting and yellow, dances around their heads. It's nearing the end of their season. This might be one of the last nights Techno sees them.

"Reminds me of being a kid," Wilbur says.

"You're still a kid."

"I'm twenty six."

"You're a kid until you hit your thirties," Techno says. "Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm older than you," Wilbur reminds him, with a glimmer of a smile. "Three years smarter, three years faster, three years better, three years—"

Something twists in Techno's stomach, ugly and nauseating.

“Stop that,” he says, and the smile falls from Wilbur’s face.

Wilbur swallows. He says, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to push.”

Three years smarter, three years faster, three years better. What Wilbur used to chant when he turned fifteen and suddenly hit his growth spurt, towering over Techno until the end of time. What he used to chant when they were nine and six respectively, chasing each other round the yards. Wilbur, with his longer legs and his brighter smile, would catch Techno nearly every time. That is, until Techno got better at the game than Wilbur was. By that point, though, neither of them cared anymore.

It’s funny, how his childhood faded away so clearly like that.

“It’s fine,” Techno says, talking around the lump in his throat.

There are a million ways for Wilbur to respond to that, but he chooses the option of remaining silent.

“I really like lightning bugs,” Wilbur whispers eventually. “Do you remember when we would catch them in jars?”

“I would catch them,” Techno reminisces. “And you would put the sticks and twigs in because you were worried that they would die.”

“And I released them all that one night with Phil. Right out into the open.”

“I was so upset,” Techno says. “I had named some of them. They were nice.”

“Wonder where they are now.”

The season of lightning bugs has most definitely come to an end. The one that they saw flying through the air has been joined by only two others. There’s not much left to look forward to.

Somewhere out there, Techno thinks, that’s where all the lightning bugs they kept are.

Somewhere out there, with the remnants of their childhood peach tree, the rope swing that hung from the lowest bough, the sweet juice dripping down their chins. Somewhere out there with marked mason jars, with scribbling childhood names on them. Somewhere out there where their biggest worry was which song Phil would put on at dinner that night. Billy Joel or Bruce Springsteen? Techno knows the lyrics to Dancing in the Dark by heart, has had them memorized since he was a kid.

Does Wilbur still hum it like he used to do, under his breath?

“I miss being a kid,” Wilbur whispers. “I miss it so much.”

Techno misses it too, so desperately. He misses the bark of the peach tree. He misses the squirrels in the backyard, fighting over the stray fruit. He misses the smell of baking bread inside the kitchen on Saturdays. He misses mathematics times tables and he misses watching scary movies with the family. He misses tasseled rugs and he misses being a child, he misses it so much. He misses being at home.

“You’re still a kid,” Techno says, even though his breath is caught in his throat and his voice sounds nearly unrecognizable to his own ears.

“I don’t feel like one,” Wilbur says. “There’s so much to do, and every day, I’m just trying to keep myself afloat, and I don’t know if I can manage anymore.”

Techno looks at him again. “Are you still living your dream?”

“Always,” Wilbur whispers. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

The moon rises overhead, full and yellow.

Techno holds Wilbur’s hand and he doesn’t let go.

He wakes up the next morning to find that fog has settled low and heavy over their home. Everything is muted and still, the sun hidden behind a thick layer of mist, and the chill seeps in through the windows directly to Techno’s bones.

He is a man of habit, and so he makes himself a cup of coffee, and then considers the pack of cigarettes in his sock drawer, the pack of nicotine gum in his bedside drawer. His fingers itch by his side and Techno forcibly stills them.

He’s a man of habit, and habit curls icy fingers around his spine, and Techno finds himself sitting, knees pulled to his chest, gazing out at the mist-covered backyard, a cigarette in between his fingers.

He doesn’t light it. Not yet. Instead he sits there, staring at the overgrown garden, and flicks his lighter on and off, on and off. The repetition is somewhat soothing. Calms the jitters, eating away at his stability.

Smoking never used to be a vice like this; it never used to be a thing that would take hold of him and shake him ruthlessly until he broke. But it’s an addiction, now, and he’s self aware enough to acknowledge that.

It’s always a back and forth, a push and pull. The knowledge that it doesn’t affect him now, but it will in... how many years? Ten? Twenty? Will he get lucky, or will this be the thing that finally gets him?

One day he’s sitting on the front porch with Tommy, thinking about how everyone in his family has told him that smoking is just a slow form of death, and going to the store to buy a pack of nicotine gum the next day in determination, and then the next moment he’s back in that jittery place, where nothing is still and there’s that bitter craving, racing through his fingers and blood and bones, and he finds himself again flicking his lighter on and off, on and off, before finally caving and lighting the cigarette.

The shift of a body behind him startles Techno out of his daze, and he turns to find himself face to face with Tommy.

“Hi,” Tommy says uncertainly.

“Hi,” Techno returns.

“Good morning?” Tommy asks.

“Is it?”

“I suppose so,” Tommy says.

Techno finds himself inclined to agree with him. He’s still riding off the high of his conversation with Wilbur last night, just the two of them and the moon and those wide expanses of childhood memories. When he glances back at Tommy, however, his younger brother doesn’t seem to share the same tentative optimism. Tommy looks tired, the bags under his eyes hanging heavy. Abruptly, Techno is reminded of the fact that Tommy has been waking up at six in the morning nearly every day in order to see Tubbo, all so Phil doesn’t know he’s breaking his rules of being grounded. Surely that’s weighing on him a little bit, even if he doesn’t show it.

“Are *you* alright?” Techno asks instead, and jerks his chin towards Tommy, “Is it a good morning for you? You look like you’re about to keel over.”

“I’m fine,” Tommy says.

He doesn’t move any further.

Techno turns his attention back to the shifting mist. He can imagine that it’s like a mirror, the way the fog swirls until it envelopes both him and Tommy, surrounding them in a mass of white.

“Did you talk to Wilbur last night?” Tommy blurts finally.

“I did,” Techno says.

“Did he say anything about me?”

Techno turns fully to look at him. Tommy is still in his pajamas, those striped blue ones that Phil bought for him years ago, but that was before Tommy had hit his growth spurt. Now, a few inches of bare ankles poke out from them. Like he’s too big for this house they’ve all outgrown.

Techno decides not to lie.

“He did,” he says, “I talked about you, too.”

Tommy’s face goes sour, like he’s sucking on a lemon.

“Did he say anything nice about me?”

This time, Techno does lie.

“He said he hopes you keep going,” he lies, and the words feel strange in his mouth, “He says that he thinks you can do great things if you really apply yourself.”

He carefully does not mention that’s not what Wilbur said at all; that the only time they brought up Tommy was when Techno really wanted to crack through whatever barrier Wilbur has put up around himself, to get right to the heart of the issue.

But Tommy’s face shifts, from nervous and anticipatory to blooming wild with hope. It flashes behind his eyes for less than an instant, but Techno can recognize it clear as day.

“Did he really?”

Techno nods.

Tommy shuffles his feet, twists the hem of his shirt between fingers, “Is that it? Did he— did he say anything else?”

“Go ask him yourself,” Techno says, “I’m not a messenger.”

“I don’t see why you can’t tell me.”

“Go wake Wilbur up and ask him yourself.”

Tommy huffs. He crosses his arms.

“Thanks for the news, I guess,” he mutters, and then turns away.

For a moment Techno wants to turn around and snap the truth— that Wilbur didn’t say any of that, to ask *why do you still care so much?* when Wilbur has been out of his life for five years now, and shouldn’t it be just him and Tommy, because Techno is the one who was there for all of Tommy’s awkward teen years, for terrible first dates and failed papers and *everything* and Wilbur wasn’t— but he doesn’t.

The cigarette burns down in his hand. Techno stares at it. Something rises in his chest, turning his stomach into nausea.

Tommy is the youngest brother between the three of them, and while there’s always been some sort of conflict, some type of competition between Wilbur and Techno, there’s never been anything like that for Tommy. He’s always been envious of them both.

But Wilbur has always cut such an imposing figure when compared to Techno, and there are so many times when Techno wonders if he was enough for Tommy growing up. After all, Wilbur left when Tommy was thirteen, right at the end of middle school, and that surely had to have a big impact on Tommy when he was so young. Techno knows that it would affect him, if he were in Tommy’s shoes.

Is he enough? Has he been a good enough brother? Did he succeed where Wilbur would have failed or is it the opposite? Has he failed where Wilbur would have been better?

Envy crawls like grape vines over Techno’s thoughts, and he irritably tears them away.

He doesn’t really have the time to spend thinking about the twisted, dysfunctional unit that their family has become. Even if these are his last few weeks before deadlines come rushing toward him like a dark car in the night.

There are so many things left to be done.

For one, moving— because moving to New York has always been some nebulous dream that Techno never intended on achieving, but somehow has become reality. To think that he’s only a few weeks away from securing the lease— just one more meeting with his landlord over call, and then a few sheets of paperwork Phil promised to help him with— and he’ll be a new resident of the Empire State.

There’s graduate school too, hanging as an eerie reminder in the back of his skull. He still hasn’t decided whether he’ll be applying or not. Put aside the matter of *how is he going to pay for another four years of education without begging Wilbur to help*, and instead focus on: does Techno have any idea what he wants to do with his life? Any direction that he wants to take it? Or is he drifting aimlessly, only existing as a means to get by?

He looked at some of the essays that he had to write, if he chose to apply. One of the prompts was *how have your character and experiences formed you into someone unique who will contribute positively and effectively to this program?*

For all his thinking and all his creativity, Techno can think of nothing unique about him at all.

The pages of editing that he needs to do for his job— working as a copy editor for a journalism firm— sit in front of him too. He needs to do them sooner or later, even when it takes all of his energy to merely think about them, let alone do work.

He goes inside. Opens his computer. Stows his cigarettes in his bedside table and firmly gets to work.

It's never come easy for him, and hours of staring at a computer screen grind down at his senses. He's tried to put on music that he knows he can stand, because the silence grates on his nerves and he can't focus when there's nothing to listen to, but he also can't focus on anything that's too repetitive or that has lyrics. That leaves very few songs to listen to, but he's had this one on repeat for too long, and it feels like drills in both sides of his head. His ears ache.

In irritation he rips them off. The journal article sits on his computer, staring at him unresponsively, and it's a wreck, he knows it is, but he can't bring himself to look at the light anymore, when even the soft lights of his bedroom feel like they're piercing through his skull.

He shuts his computer, presses both palms over his ears, tries to breathe. Is very grateful that the only sensory overload he's experiencing right now is with sound and sight, because he's had those rare times where even the fabric against his skin is too much, and those are the times when he never knows how to calm himself down or bring himself back to earth.

Faintly he wonders if Wilbur still experiences the same things. Wilbur hated certain textures more than anything; he had raided Techno's closet one day, pulling hoodies and sweaters off coat hangers and taking them for his own; and more than once, Techno had shouted at Wilbur for humming too loudly or playing the guitar too much, twanging through the hallways of the house.

Thankfully, Wilbur is not doing any of that right now.

Techno winces, forces himself to stand. He's been through enough sensory overloads that he knows what will help him; cold water, fresh air. The taste of mint gum brings him back into focus too, and Techno grits his teeth, pushing himself up and he starts to walk— he doesn't know where he'll end up, but he finds himself standing in front of Wilbur's closed door after an endless moment.

He raises his hand. Wonders, contemplatively, whether he should knock or not.

When he does, there's a muffled noise of displeasure from inside. Wilbur's voice echoes through the thin bedroom walls: "Would you mind— can I have a moment?"

Techno stands, waiting, not even sure what he wants, seeking some sort of comfort like their conversation last night, seeking solace.

But Wilbur opens the door, brows set low and face frustrated, and says, "Do you need something?"

The headache still pounds at Techno's temples.

"Nothing," he says, "I just—"

“I’m in the middle of something,” Wilbur says sharply, “Whatever you can need, it can wait.”

Techno doesn’t even *know* why he came to Wilbur, now that he thinks about it. How stupid of him to hope that he was going to be— kinder? More understanding? Less like this shadowed soul of a brother that he’s become? Did he really think one conversation was going to solve things?

“I just wanted to talk,” Techno says, stung.

“Talk later.”

“Wilbur—”

“Don’t you have work to do?” Wilbur says mildly. “Things that don’t involve getting in *my* way?”

Techno takes a step back. He hadn’t even realized that he had stepped closer.

“I see,” he says, after an endless moment. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“Good,” Wilbur says, even more irritated this time, and now they’re standing on opposite sides of the hallway. “Please don’t interrupt me.”

A million words want to be shouted into the air. Techno wants to grab him by the shoulders and shake him violently. *Who are you?* he wants to shout.

The door slams. Wilbur gets back onto whatever call he was on. Techno can hear the way his words change, can hear the way that he speaks through an easygoing smile. Can hear him say, clear as day, *just some family trouble. It’ll clear up in a few days or so. You know I’m only away for two more weeks, don’t you?*

The worst thing about this whole situation, Techno notes distantly, is that Wilbur doesn’t seem upset, like he’s intending to hurt.

Somehow, that stings the most.

Instead of doing something he’ll regret, opening the door on Wilbur, shouting at him, bringing the entire house down in his frustration and irritation, Techno turns on his heel and stalks away.

The house is empty and cold and yawns, gaping and black, and the sound of Wilbur slamming his door echoes down the hallway and Techno doesn’t want to move, doesn’t want to think, wants a *goddamn cigarette* because he’s not getting enough from the gum —

He pushes his way through the back door and finds himself in the backyard, where it’s blessedly silent.

When Techno was in the eighth grade, bordering on fourteen years old, Phil had redesigned the garden. The garden used to not exist at all; it was a stretch of green grass, slowly turning yellow and brown with time, and a few scraggly trees. It had taken a few months for it to transform from a scrubby, half-dead field into something that could grow plants.

Techno doesn’t know how Phil did it— though his father has always been with somewhat of a green thumb— but now they have plants that grow year round, even when they’re only supposed to grow seasonally. He’s seen daffodils sprout up in the middle of summer, roses in the middle of winter. He’s seen strawberries grow in the fall. How it happens, he doesn’t know, but their garden has always held some sort of magic. Techno doesn’t know how to name it; all he knows is that things change, when he’s out here, because the world fades away until it’s only him and the earth

and the sky and the wild, roaring sun.

He tries to lose himself in that mood now. He sits back on his heels, stares at the swirling mass of leaves and vines before him, and digs his hands deep into the soft earth, feeling it turn beneath his fingers. It's soothing, to become so connected to the earth like this. It captivates him in a way that nothing else can.

This is where Phil finds him, what could be a second or a minute or an hour later. Phil sits next to him and says, carefully, doing his best to play the father role, "I heard that you and Wilbur got into an argument."

He's not sure how Phil knows about it, given the fact that Wilbur is the least likely person to go to Phil when they're having an argument, because Wilbur has always been the type to figure things out on his own and Techno didn't tell Phil why he was so upset.

"Yeah," Techno says, and looks tonelessly down at the dirt beneath his fingernails. "Wasn't a fight, though. Just a minor disagreement"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he grits, "I don't want to talk about Wilbur right now."

"Is there any way I can help?"

Techno can't help it; he snorts. A laugh builds in the back of his throat.

"You," he says, turning fully to face his father, "Are a terrible mediator."

"I'm trying my best."

"Can I suggest family therapy instead?"

Phil huffs. "I don't know if Tommy would agree to it."

"He's grounded right now," Techno says, "Might appreciate the opportunity to be out of the house."

"Hasn't he been out nearly every day?"

Techno stills. He hadn't been aware that Phil knew that. "Has he?"

"Do you think I'm dumb?" Phil says amusedly, "I know Tommy isn't staying at home every day. I know he's breaking his curfew. To tell you the truth, I don't... I don't really mind."

"Hm."

"I don't think it's entirely fair to keep him here," Phil admits, "He's still a growing kid, right?"

"He's an adult, technically."

"Still the youngest."

"You know," Techno says, "I think he hates it when people say that."

"Does he really?"

Techno pauses. “Have you talked to him at all recently, or are you getting all your information secondhand from Wilbur or me?”

Phil’s face is pale, confused, caught off-guard. He looks so uncertain and for the briefest moment, so *tired*— tired like Techno has never seen him before, lost and unsure and so painfully out of touch.

He says, “Tommy and I haven’t talked much.”

“Hm.”

“We did last night, when you and Wilbur were out of the house,” Phil admits, and one hand comes up to scratch at the back of his head, and Techno bites down on whatever words you were going to say. “I told him that he shouldn’t be breaking his curfew, and he... he accused me of some things.”

Techno doesn’t know what to say, so he only hums incoherently.

Phil’s expression is guarded, still.

“Techno,” he asks, “Do I play favorites?”

That question rocks Techno to a complete standstill. His hands pause from where they’re sorting through the tomato leaves, looking for ripe ones to pluck. Achingly, he’s suddenly aware of every sensation in his body, from the numb tingling in his right leg from sitting on it so strangely, to the scratchy leaves brushing against the soft underside of his wrist. There’s a bird chirping from a tree above them, singing to the world, and a car passes by the front of the house, wind blurring around it. He doesn't even know what to say.

It’s not something he likes to admit, now that he’s older. That even when all the rumors say that middle children are the most forgettable, given the least attention. Techno experienced the opposite.

He realizes that he’s been silent for too long, sitting there stock still, not sure what to say.

Awkwardly, he tries for a half truth.

“Maybe,” he says, though his own mouth knows that he’s lying to himself, “I’m not entirely sure.”

“Really?”

“Well,” Techno tries again, but finds that no words shape on his tongue. He has no idea what to say.

He has no idea because the truth of it is right there, written in ink and blood and years of sweat and tears: Techno is the favorite.

He’s the favorite. He’s always been the favorite, and he suspects that’s one of the reasons why Wilbur was so quick to leave, because he knew that he would never match up to what Techno was. It didn’t matter if Techno was pursuing a loveless career or something that would turn him into the caricature of a starving artist. It didn’t matter if Techno might never enact change in the world or do something dramatic, something real. It didn’t matter if Techno was inferior in practically every way, if Wilbur was more sociable and smiling and excited to interact with others. None of that mattered, when they were kids, not to Wilbur.

What mattered to Wilbur was what they got from Phil.

And Phil... did he give enough? Did he nourish Wilbur in the same way that he nourished Techno?

“Why are you asking me this?” Techno whispers.

“You’re the only one I think I’ll get a straight answer from,” Phil says, and grimaces in frustration, as if realizing that his statement is only proving the point, “Because Tommy will say that you’re the favorite, and Wilbur... would have, if I asked him years ago. I don’t know what he’ll say now, but.” His tone transforms into depressive, a little humorous. “I can guess.”

Techno stares down at the garden. Something bitter and awful swells in his chest.

“I think,” he says, testing each word on his tongue before it makes it into sound, “I think... sometimes you might have been... biased.”

Phil makes a non-committal sound.

“I think Wilbur is frustrated,” Techno continues, maddeningly slow, “That maybe he didn’t get as much attention as other people did.”

“Hm.”

“And I think Tommy is— Tommy.” That’s the only way to put it.

“Hm,” Phil says again, but now his tone has changed into something mournful, a little lost.

“But that doesn’t mean— it doesn’t mean anything,” Techno tries.

“Hm.”

“Because you’re still the best dad any of the three of us have had,” Techno says, staring determinedly into the earth. His face feels hot. “Even if they won’t tell you that to your face.”

That’s the thing about being a parent. Phil’s brave for taking all three of them on, and also a little stupid, and a little mad, and sometimes Techno thinks that he’s practically insane because raising three children from the foster system would have broken him.

But Phil never broke, at least not in places that Techno could see it, and instead kept going, kept doing everything that he was doing, doing his *best*— but that’s the difficult thing about being a parent. You try your best and you can do everything right in every situation, but you still won’t do things correctly. You will never be enough.

So how do you tell your father that he was neglectful? How do you tell him that he did the best that he could, but his best still wasn’t enough? How do you tell him that being a parent is difficult and it’ll never work out in the way that you want it to? How do you tell him that he’s the best influence you’ve ever had and also the worst? How do you tell him that a piece of your soul lives in his forever, and in return, you’ve taken a piece of his soul to carry with you to the ends of the earth, for better or for worse?

Phil doesn’t respond, even when Techno looks over at him.

“Thank you for that,” he says eventually, after what felt like a lifetime of stillness. “I appreciated hearing that.”

Techno’s face still feels hot, burning with some fire within, and he wishes the morning mist was still there to cool him off.

“It’s whatever,” he shrugs.

“It isn’t.”

“Don’t make it into something bigger that it’s not,” Techno says, though the words feel like a lie.

The issue is that it *is* something bigger; it’ll always be something bigger. Even if none of them realize it.

Because Phil is the best dad they’ve ever had, and also the worst, because in Techno’s all-important opinion, he’s the only dad that they’ve ever had.

Wilbur or Tommy might say differently. Personally, however, Techno thinks that the only reason he’s turned out this great is because of Phil. He’s not sure whether his brothers would agree.

“It’s only as important as you want it to be,” Phil says.

Techno nods distantly.

He asks, “So— do you?”

“What?”

Techno can’t stop himself from asking. “Do you think you have favorites?”

It’s embarrassing to ask. He’s twenty-three years old. He shouldn’t be asking this, shouldn’t be needing answers like this. Shouldn’t be seeking whatever source of validation this will become.

Phil looks back down at the garden. His gaze is damp, staring into nothing, looking down at the garden like he’s seeing it the way it was before.

“I think,” he says, and it’s as if he wants to say something entirely different before he cuts himself off: “I think I’m very proud of all three of you. And I hope that all of you go on to do great things.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

The afternoon sun begins to dip over the horizon. The light changes from pale and yellow into a dim orange, sinking lower. The dirt is cold beneath Techno’s hands. He imagines that it soaks all warmth and nostalgia from them, transforming into something jagged and cruel beneath his hands.

“Then yes,” Phil says quietly, like he’s admitting it to himself for the first time. “Sometimes I do.”

A father and his favorite son sit by a garden that holds so much more than just dirt and plants and fruit. They sit in silence until the evening dawns blue and inky over them, and the nighttime fog arrives once more. It clouds everything in gentle, soft white.

The mist is quiet, magical in its stillness. It makes Techno wonder, when the morning sun burns off this fog, what he will find that it has changed.

not incredibly proud of this chapter, but im sticking to the weekly updates for better or for worse, so. please leave kudos/comments if you enjoyed, i would really appreciate it <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

As Techno's lease becomes finalized, bringing him one step closer to leaving home forever, tensions ramp up between the rest of the family.

Chapter Notes

thank you so much for all your comments on the last chapter, they were all so wonderful to read and i'm sorry i couldn't respond to them all. here's an extra long chapter to make up for it! enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno faxes the finished paperwork over to his new landlord when he wakes up at eight, and realizes— that's it. He'll receive his house key in two weeks when his flight finally lands in New York, and then he'll never go home again.

This Friday marks two weeks of Wilbur being at home— which really marks seven days until his flight back to Los Angeles— as well as two weeks until Techno's gone as well. He breaks the news about his lease to everyone at their family dinner that night. He expects Tommy to look happy, but he doesn't. Even Phil takes a moment to muster up a smile. The only one who looks even remotely excited is Wilbur.

“Congrats,” he says mildly, “Pass the sprouts, would you?”

Techno does. He turns to Tommy. “Not even a smile?”

Tommy's foot kicks him underneath the table, which betrays his emotions more than any congratulatory phrase can. “Congrats, I guess.”

“That's great news,” Phil says, as sincerely as possible, “I guess we should probably start looking at furniture, right? Or have you been doing that?”

“I've been doing that,” Techno says. He has not.

“Just let me know if you need any help with it,” Phil says diplomatically.

Techno hums. Forks clink as the family dines in silence. He pokes dully at the chicken on his plate, though it tastes like nothing.

“So when's your flight?” Tommy says abruptly.

“Two weeks from now,” Techno says, “Not next Friday, but the week after.”

Tommy's sullen gaze only deepens. Something turns uncomfortably in Techno's stomach as Tommy pushes his chair back from the table, storms off into the kitchen. Techno hears the clatter

of his plate landing in the sink with such force he's surprised Tommy didn't break anything.

Phil's gaze switches from Techno, staring listlessly at his dinner, to Wilbur, seemingly indifferent about what happened, and the hallway Tommy has vanished down. Without another word, Phil sighs, stands up, and paces after Tommy.

After a moment, Techno asks, "Reckon I should go talk to him?"

Wilbur scoffs. "He'll be fine."

They lapse into silence again.

The pit in Techno's stomach sinks until he feels as if his entire body is one massive iron weight. Wilbur barely looks concerned at Tommy's mood, and Techno feels—

"I'm going to start cleaning," Techno says bluntly, unable to stay seated any longer, "You can help if you'd like."

He doesn't expect Wilbur to join him by the sink, but he does anyway. The water runs soapy and hot, and the sink smells of the same lemon scented dish soap that they've been using for years. The windows in front of the counter are open, though they really should be closed; it's cold today, one of the days where the mist hasn't left at all.

"You're being silent," Wilbur notes.

"I have nothing to say."

"Really?"

Techno presses his mouth shut and starts on the next dish.

Wilbur sighs, long-suffering, "Talk to me."

"I thought you didn't want me talking to you."

Wilbur's eyes slant towards him. "You know I was busy last week."

Techno purposely doesn't respond. Wilbur passes Techno the next serving plate. Techno squeezes the water from the sponge and begins scrubbing. When he's done, he passes it back to Wilbur, who dries it off neatly and stacks it on the drying rack. The motions are familiar; Techno has forgotten the amount of times that the two of them stood at the sink and cleaned dishes together.

"I think it'll be nice for you to get away from here," comments Wilbur. "It'll be a good change."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean—" Wilbur spreads his hands expansively, "You can't stay at home forever."

"Who said I was staying at home forever?"

"Wasn't that your plan?"

"I'm on a *gap year*, Wil," Techno sighs, "I didn't have a plan until recently."

"Are you still applying to graduate school, then?"

“Maybe.”

“Where?”

Techno fumbles awfully for a name to come up with, thinking about *any* of the places he’s looked at, any of them at all, and manages, “A few different universities. I haven’t decided.”

“Well,” Wilbur asks, “What are you planning on studying? Any— any interesting questions on your applications?”

Techno’s hands tighten convulsively on the plate in his hands. “I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

Wilbur tries, “Still planning on studying English?”

The plate falls from Techno’s hands and clatters noisily to the bottom of the sink. Techno wheels sharply on him. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Well, you wanted to talk last week! I couldn’t talk then, so I’m trying to talk now— is that a crime?”

“The difference is that I *wanted* to talk then,” Techno corrects. “And I *don’t* want to talk now.”

“I’m only trying to—”

Phil takes that precise moment to exit from Tommy’s room. He glances over the both of them, oblivious to the tension rippling throughout the kitchen.

“Tech, you’re cleaning?” Phil says in surprise. “That’s wonderful, thank you.”

“It’s no problem,” Techno says, “Wilbur was about to take my place, besides.”

“I wasn’t—”

Techno smiles thinly, and Wilbur’s gaze goes unimpressed.

“Asshole.”

“Have fun,” Techno mutters, and flicks the water from his hands as he passes Phil on his way to Tommy’s room. He has no interest in talking to either Wilbur or Phil right then, but he knows Tommy— and he knows Tommy well enough to be aware that Tommy wants to talk.

It takes three separate knocks and one stubborn kick to the base of the door before he hears Tommy’s voice grudgingly say, *what do you want?*

“It’s me,” Techno calls, and Tommy sighs heavily.

“Come in,” he grouses, and Techno does.

Tommy’s room is a mishmash of every personality type Tommy has ever been through. Just by looking at the walls, Techno can highlight which phases Tommy has been through and which ones he’s exited. The band posters from sixth grade are still on the walls, though he’s certain Tommy doesn’t listen to their music anymore. He has a framed picture of New York from when he was into photography over that one summer. The year after that, when he made a habit of collecting comic books, is marked by a framed, original comic from the 1960’s.

Techno's eyes land on Tommy's backpack, unzipped and gutted open by his desk. It's filled to the brim with textbooks he had purchased for his first semester at college; they'll never be read now.

"Sorry for storming off at the dinner table," Tommy mutters. He's sitting in his desk chair, a blanket wrapped loosely around his shoulders. One of his knees is pulled to his chest, and the other is hanging loosely to the ground. In the few minutes he's been away from the table, he's changed from jeans into a loose pair of sweatpants, marked with his university's name. "I already apologized to Phil, but I can apologize to you too if you want."

"I don't care if you apologize," Techno says, and he takes a seat on Tommy's bed. "I'm just here to talk."

"You're so annoying," Tommy sighs.

"Well?" Techno prompts. "Go for it. Vent everything. I'm here to listen."

"It's so stupid," Tommy huffs, "But when you leave— it's just going to be me and Dad at home. I can't do that."

"I was always going to leave, you know."

"That doesn't make it any better!" Tommy bursts. "At least *he's* leaving before you are, though."

"That's not very nice."

"I don't want to be stuck at home when it's just me," Tommy says, close to whining.

Techno kicks him again. "You're acting like a baby."

"I'm not a baby."

"I didn't say you were."

"You said I was—"

Techno doesn't have the emotional energy to get into a bickering match with Tommy right now. "Alright. That one's on me. Sorry for calling you a child."

Tommy abruptly clamps his mouth shut, looking like he wants to say something else, and then drops his gaze to the floor.

"Phil's not so bad," Techno says, after a pause, "It's nice when it's just the two of us."

"For *you* ."

"Plus he'll probably want you to go outside more when there's no one else here, which means you'll be un-grounded," Techno adds, "You're getting a job, right?"

Tommy grimaces. "I don't know if I want to get a job."

A horrible thought crosses Techno's mind: "Is he making you pay back tuition?"

"What?" Tommy gapes. "No, of course not. I mean— I don't know, but I really don't think he would. I don't know what I would *do* if he did."

"Don't worry," Techno says hastily, "He won't. I'm sure of it."

“Even if he does, I can’t even *get* a job when I’m still grounded,” Tommy sighs, “And I really don’t think Dad will un-ground me anytime soon. Especially when Wilbur’s here.”

Techno’s mind flashes back to the conversation he had with Phil a few afternoons ago, in the garden together. “You should talk to him. I’m sure he would let you run free for just a few days.”

“I doubt it.”

“I still think it’d be worth a shot.”

“Maybe I will,” Tommy decides.

“Do it,” Techno advises. “He’s been in a decent mood lately, alright? Don’t waste it.”

Tommy leans back, rolls his eyes until only the whites show. “I hate you.”

“I hate you too,” Techno says fondly. “Go to sleep early, right? And stop waking up at six every morning. It’s going to kill you.”

“Will not!”

Techno recites, “Studies of long-term sleep deprivation show that—”

“Oh my God,” Tommy sighs, “Go away, go away, I hate talking to you.”

Techno grins and closes the door.

His good mood instantly fades, burnt away like morning mist underneath the sun, when he sees that Wilbur is still washing dishes by the sink. He looks up when Techno passes by on his way to his room, and the two of them make eye contact through the blurred reflection in the window. Techno feels the physical distance between them like it’s a live thing, all-consuming.

Wilbur’s voice is flat. “So it’s just me you didn’t want to talk with, then.”

The aching distance between them shifts into a sick sense of guilt. Techno feels it like a punch to the chest.

Wilbur looks at him, expression warped by the glass, and then looks downward.

Techno only turns away.

The next afternoon, Tommy comes eagerly to see him.

“Hey,” Tommy grins, and raps on Techno’s door frame, “Guess what?”

Techno slides his headphones around his ears. He looks unimpressed at Tommy. “What?”

Tommy’s voice beams with pride. “Phil agreed to end my house arrest. You were right.”

“You’re not grounded?”

“I’ll be grounded again when Tubbo goes to college, but he’s going to a UC, and they don’t start

until October first. So I have the next week and a half off.”

“Congratulations,” he says, because he knows Tommy only comes to him when he needs something from him, “And what do you want from me?”

Tommy fidgets slightly, and he blurts, “I want you to drive me and Tubbo to the bowling alley.”

“Wow,” Techno says dryly. “That’s really interesting.”

Tommy glowers. “You shut up.”

“Can Tubbo not drive?”

Tommy shakes his head. “I would ask Wil, but…”

“Is he on a call?”

Tommy huffs. “Closed the door in my face.”

Techno resists the urge to poke his head around the doorway and see what Wilbur is up to. He’s had his door closed the entire morning.

“And Phil said this was okay?” Techno double checks, and Tommy nods so eagerly that his hair bounces back and forth.

“Come on,” Tommy bugs him, “This is going to be one of the last times I see Tubbo before he goes, come on, Techno.”

Techno looks from his pleading brother back to his computer. He’s had a blank document open, waiting to be written on for hours, but anything he types immediately gets deleted.

How have your character and experiences formed you into someone unique who will contribute positively and effectively to this program?

Nothing comes to mind.

“You’ve been seeing him nearly every day,” Techno sighs, and closes his computer, “But fine. Let’s go.”

Tommy pumps his fist in the air. “I knew I could count on you.”

Techno resists the urge to roll his eyes as he snatches the car keys from his bedside table. Tommy beats him to the front; he already has his puffy coat, far too bulky for how scrawny he is, and he pulls it on. Outside, the clouds hang low and threatening; rain seems imminent on the horizon.

“I’m heading to Tubbo’s house, right?” Techno checks.

“Mhm,” Tommy says, and slides into the front seat. He goes to kick his feet up on the dashboard, but at one look from Techno, puts them down again. Techno points a warning finger at him and demands, *seatbelt*. Tommy scowls but pulls it on, and Techno begins the familiar route towards Tubbo’s house.

Tommy and Tubbo have been friends since Tommy’s first few days at their household. Tommy was adopted at nine, which was a shocking change for both Techno and Wilbur, seeing as they were both more than a few years older, but over time, they learned to appreciate him. Tommy was a little goofy and more than a little stupid at times. He liked to get in big, argumentative fights, but

he liked to win them. He was far too skilled at cheating at Monopoly (thus, the board game had been outlawed in the Watson household). He was loud and vivacious and made friends easily, and that was where Tubbo came into play.

Tubbo, at the first glance, appeared to be the opposite of Tommy. His mother swore that he and Tommy becoming friends was the most unlikely thing. Yet somehow, in the middle of one third grade school day, the two of them had linked up. Techno had hardly seen them separate since. He was shocked when they decided that they were going to opposite sides of the country for college. Tubbo was going to one of the UCs; Tommy was remaining on the East Coast. For the first time in around ten years, the two of them would be separated.

Techno mulls on this as he turns towards Tubbo's house. Tommy's knee is bouncing, like it's unable to sit still. It makes a warmth glow to life inside of Techno's chest—he likes seeing his little brother happy.

“We're here,” Techno says, but Tommy barely waits until Techno pulls to a complete stop before wrenching the car door open. It's begun to rain, enough that the pavement is dark and damp, and Tommy races to Tubbo's front door. It flies open before Tommy has the chance to knock, and out emerges Tubbo. He has a knitted scarf that covers nearly half his face, and it flies behind him as the two of them rush back to the car. Techno winces as the two of them squeeze together in the backseat.

“Alright,” he says, mentally preparing himself for the noise of their conversation, “Where am I taking you two?”

“Bowling alley,” Tommy says.

“At seventeenth and Alameda.”

“The one that got revamped last year. It has the neon lights now and everything.”

“They have an arcade too— you brought money, right?”

“Of course,” Tommy says. Techno spurs the car into motion and knocks away Tommy's hand when he reaches over the console to change the music.

“My car, my music,” Techno says, and Tommy slumps back in his seat. Techno glares at him through the rearview mirror and then blanches— “Put your seatbelts on, both of you.”

“*Wilbur* doesn't make me put my seatbelt on,” Tommy mutters, and he jerks his seatbelt irritably as he clicks the buckle in.

“Wilbur is incredibly irresponsible,” Techno says, tamping down on the irritation in his chest. “You too, Tubbo, or else I'm turning around.”

“My coat is like an airbag,” Tubbo says. “I wouldn't get hurt even if you did crash.” Still, he clicks his seatbelt into place.

The radio station changes from David Bowie to Van Morrison's *Sweet Thing*. Techno turns the music down by two notches and turns onto the expressway. It'll take them directly to the bowling alley that Tubbo and Tommy have been talking about.

Halfway along the deserted expressway, however, the engine makes a funny noise. No one is out driving but them; the rain is falling thickly, blurring the windshield enough that Techno has the windshield wipers moving as quick as possible.

Two seconds later, the *check engine* light begins flashing. Techno frowns. He obligingly keeps going, and turns the radio up a notch higher. Tommy reaches over to turn it down again and Techno swats his hand away. Tommy and Tubbo's conversation has been bouncing from topic to topic, discussing everything imaginable in the world. Techno tunes into it for a moment to hear them talking about the cheapest pizza place and whether it's worth it or not. Tubbo is staunchly in favor of Pizza Hut, while Tommy stands by Little Caesars. Techno grimaces. He's been through college, all four years of it, mind you— he knows what's worth buying or not. He opens his mouth to contribute to their conversation, but before a single word escapes, the two of them have moved on. Somehow they're talking about Disneyworld and whether it's worth it to go. Tommy has never been. Tubbo's parents took him there when he was six for a family vacation.

Then the engine, horribly, putters to a stop.

Their conversation peters out.

Tubbo frowns. "Why did we stop?"

Techno smacks the center of the steering wheel, floors on the gas pedal, as though that will do anything. Nothing happens. The car doesn't respond. The radio is still playing, but that's about it. There's just enough juice left for Techno to merge onto the shoulder of the road, in the middle of nowhere. In the middle of a pounding rainstorm.

"I think we're out of gas," he says, although that's not entirely it. Techno doesn't know jack shit about cars at all.

"Why didn't we just get gas before we left?" Tommy scowls. He kicks the back of Techno's seat irritably, which makes a hot pulse of anger spike through Techno. He thought he had been clear enough about it— *never* kick the driver's seat while they're driving. He wishes Tubbo had sat behind him instead.

Techno irritably tries starting the car again. It doesn't even budge.

"Is the battery dead?"

"I don't know," Techno says, and tries starting the car again, though it doesn't even make a sound. The rain patters down harder, slamming against the earth. It blurs all the windows, enough that the heat makes the inside of them fog up.

"Is the car going to explode?"

"No," Techno says firmly, "Tubbo, why would you even ask that? Tommy, go look up the name of a tow truck company and call them."

"No," Tommy scowls, but he obediently pulls out his phone to do so anyway. He clicks a number and then raises his phone to his ear. In the moments between the call and the person on the other end picks up, he desperately mouths to Techno. *What do I say?*

Tubbo grabs Tommy's phone. "Give it here, I'll talk to them. Hello?"

The person on the other end talks, their voice muffled. Tubbo hangs up after only a few minutes of conversation. "I think they'll be here in— in fifteen minutes? I hope I told them the right exit. I'm not entirely sure."

"You did," Techno reassures. "All that's left to do is wait."

Uneasy silence falls over the three of them. It's strange how Techno suddenly feels so old, sitting in the same car as two eighteen year olds. He hasn't talked to Tubbo one on one in a long time, and it's clear that Tommy feels just as awkward as Techno does.

Finally, Tubbo blurts, "So how are you, Techno?"

Techno hums. He turns down the music. *Sweet Thing* has shifted to an old song by the Beatles . He wonders what CD Phil had left in the radio for him to listen to. "I've been fine."

"I heard you graduated."

Techno nods. "About five months ago, but yes."

Tubbo ducks his head. "Oh."

Techno grimaces. He hates small talk, but Tubbo seems interested, so he does his best to continue the conversation. "I heard you were going to California, right?"

"He is," Tommy proclaims, before Tubbo even has the chance to open his mouth, "He's going all the way to the Bay Area. He got into Berkeley . "

"That seems like it'll be a good fit."

Techno has no idea what Tubbo wants to study or anything about what UC Berkeley is like. Regardless, Tubbo seems to glow with praise.

"Thanks," he says, and it's clear how excited he is about it. "Though I still don't know what I want to study— I was planning on studying film like Tommy is, but I wasn't sure..."

The rest of his words fade away into a dull buzz. Techno tilts his head curiously. Tommy is studying film? He hadn't known that.

"I didn't know you were into film," Techno says, once Tubbo's rambling peters off.

"He's really good at it!" Tubbo blurts. "You should see some of the stuff he puts together in his free time, really—"

"It's no big deal," Tommy mutters, and ducks his head in embarrassment, "It's not any good."

Tubbo shoulders him genially. "It's *wonderful* ."

"You *have* to say that," Tommy groans, "You're my best friend."

"I'm saying it because you are!" Tubbo exclaims, and Techno is supremely grateful for the knock on their car window at that exact moment.

The guy who approaches them has a raincoat pulled over him and an umbrella out. His shirt is stamped with the logo of the tow truck company that Tubbo had called, and he says, "You're the fellas who got stuck out here?"

"Pleased to meet you," Techno says, in lieu of an introduction. "I'm not entirely sure what's wrong, but the car just stopped halfway to where we're headed."

Tommy and Tubbo quiet down in the backseat as Techno and the repairman talk. It makes jitters of anxiety spread through Techno's chest, and he hotly wishes that he had the same kind of bravery as his two siblings. He's an introvert, not built for the same kind of energy that the two of them give

off. His fingers itch for a cigarette to quell the anxiety, and he forcibly stuffs his hand into his pocket. The rain spills down around the four of them, pounding to the black tar of the expressway, and splashes into the interior of the car.

Finally, the repairman shrugs. The umbrella he's holding blocks most of the rain out, though Techno can still tell that his hair is getting damp. "I can give the three of you a ride to wherever you're going, but I think it would be best to bring it into the shop for the day. That's the most I can do."

Techno doesn't have anything against that. He does feel bad that Tubbo and Tommy's little hangout session will get cut brutally short before it even has the chance to begin.

"Sound good with the two of you?" Techno checks, and both of them nod in the backseat. Tubbo's scarf conceals half of his expression, but he doesn't look too upset.

"Where are we going, then?"

Their tiny little sedan is hooked onto the tow truck, while the three of them are forced into the cramped backseat. Techno, as the oldest, feels obliged to give his home address, but Tommy blurts out before he even has the chance to speak.

"The closest coffee shop," he says, and hastily tacks on, "Please, Mr. Repairman."

The guy makes eye contact with Techno, as if to check if it's okay, and Techno only shrugs. He's here as a chauffeur for Tommy and Tubbo; it doesn't really matter where they want to go. The tow truck's engine rumbles into motion, and it only takes them a few minutes before the three of them are unceremoniously deposited at the closest coffee shop off the expressway. It glows with yellow light through the pounding rain, and it's thankfully mostly empty. Tommy and Tubbo duck under the awning to go inside, while Techno stays behind just to check that his car is in good hands. When everything seems settled and secure, and Techno's given him his phone number and insurance, he follows Tommy and Tubbo inside.

They're waiting by the counter. Tubbo gives Techno a quizzical look when he enters, and with a sweet, pleading expression that fools no one, says, "Will you pay for our drinks?"

"Absolutely not," Techno declares.

"Please?"

"Phil gave you money," Techno says, and directs this statement at Tommy next, "You can pay for it yourself."

"Please?" Tubbo pleads again, and he bumps his shoulder against Tommy's. "You know, Techno, I'm only in town for a few more weeks, and I need to save all my spare money for textbooks, for when I need to buy them— and Tommy tells me that you have a job, so really, two five dollar coffees shouldn't even be that big of a deal for you—"

Techno grimaces.

"Fine," he scowls, and digs out his wallet from his coat pocket. He's very glad that he didn't leave it in the glovebox. "Go order whatever you want."

"Excellent," Tommy grins, and promptly orders the largest size of the most sugary thing on the menu, which is much more than five dollars worth. Tubbo follows as such. Techno sighs, and he simply orders a small black coffee. The barista barely blinks at the three of them, even though

they're the only people in the store, and Techno pays. It's a significant amount out of his wallet. He makes a mental note to berate Tommy for this later when he's not in front of Tubbo.

The three of them find seats in a back booth, by the window. The rain is coming down harder than ever, splashing off the sidewalks. The gutters are full of swirling leaves and miscellaneous trash. From the rooftops, the eaves spill rainwater down in gushing rivulets. Techno wishes he had the forethought to bring an umbrella. He didn't expect for the entire damn car to break down, though.

"So," he says, awkwardly looking for anything to break the silence while their drinks arrive, "What are you planning to study again, Tubbo?"

"I'm not sure," Tubbo says, "Maybe computer science? Maybe biology? Maybe I'll just go in undecided. They have all of these distribution requirements that I have to fill, anyway, so I might as well just take one of every class."

"Hm."

"I've been really interested in environmental science recently," Tubbo adds. "Even though I hated it in high school. I thought it was the worst class ever."

"You hated it because of Mrs. Springer," Tommy mutters under his breath. "She was such a terrible teacher. She failed me on my first lab assignment of the year."

"She was *awful!*" Tubbo exclaims, "I hope I don't have a professor like her, that would be awful."

"I'm sure you won't," Techno promises. "Professors in college are much more chill, they don't mark you down for stupid things."

"I sure hope so," Tubbo says. "But I'm still so excited to go! I've never lived away from home, and I think it'll be wonderful. Even if I don't know what I'm majoring in, at least I'll have fun, right?"

Tommy's face grows tight and tense, and abruptly, he stands up from the table. "I'm going to the restroom. Be back in a minute."

Techno watches him go. The second he's out of earshot, too, Tubbo props his chin up in one hand, stares mournfully out of the window. Techno doesn't know what to say; he and Tubbo have never been particularly close.

Techno tries to apologize for Tommy weakly, but Tubbo only shrugs.

"He's upset. It's okay. We've been talking a lot."

"Is it?"

"It probably wasn't very nice of me to be talking about how excited I am right in front of him. That might not have been the smartest thing."

"Tommy's an adult. He can handle you talking about going to university."

Tubbo pokes his straw irritably at the caffeinated slush inside his cup. "I don't know. Maybe. But I still feel bad talking about how excited I am when I *know* he didn't have a great time. He's probably told you all of this already, but—" Tubbo heaves a deep sigh— "He texted me the day before he got expelled, saying he was going to come home, and—"

"Wait—" Techno stops him. "Tommy texted you?"

Tubbo nods.

“*Before* he got expelled?”

Tubbo nods again.

“What did he say?” Techno asks. “He still hasn’t told me why he got kicked out— did he tell you? Did he tell you in advance?”

“Well...”

The wheels turn in Techno’s head slowly, drawing him towards a conclusion he’s not sure that he likes.

His mind churns. “Tubbo, did Tommy get expelled on *purpose*?”

As if on cue, Tommy bursts through the swinging doors that lead to the bathroom.

“Hey,” he grins, with a smile that’s too forced, “What did I miss?”

Tubbo’s eyes are still uneasy. His gaze flicks between Techno and Tommy before forcing himself to smile, too. He kicks Techno underneath the table. A silent but heavy reminder to *shut up*.

“Nothing,” Tubbo lies, “Come on, sit back down. Techno and I weren’t talking about anything at all.”

Techno marks off another day on his calendar as another night passes. Wilbur leaves in four days, now. Techno leaves in eleven. That leaves a terrifyingly short amount of time for all four of them to spend together.

Unfortunately, none of them seem very keen on spending said time together. Now that Tommy’s curfew is lifted and he’s no longer grounded, he spends nearly every waking moment out of the house with Tubbo. Wilbur is busy with seemingly everything, barely spending time at family dinners, and so Phil is the only family member that Techno ends up interacting with. Even those conversations, too, are tainted. Something sour permeates the entire house, leaving Techno feeling uncomfortable and cloistered away after every conversation.

He goes for a walk when the sun dips low over the horizon. Techno doesn’t even bother telling anyone he’s leaving, only closes the door silently behind him.

He isn’t sure where he plans on going, only that he’s growing increasingly uncomfortable with sitting still. That’s a way of life for him; he goes through phases where he’s either perfectly content sitting in absolute stillness for hours, and then there are weeks where he has to be moving every second, twisting a pen, jittering his knee beneath the table, in order to feel steady. He can feel himself melting into that period of forced activity; his hands are jonesing for a long-forgotten pack of cigarettes, which is always a bad sign.

Fortunately he doesn’t have any on himself. The looks Phil and Tommy give him are enough motivation to quit on their own, but the other day, Wilbur had thrown such a scathing glare that Techno was surprised he didn’t melt down to the bone. It’s only further incentive. Techno will take

it.

So there's nothing in his pockets of importance. Only lint and house keys and a leather wallet, rubbed smooth with time.

The playground is quiet and dark when he arrives, the moon full on the horizon. Techno clambers to the highest point of it, swings his legs from the edge.

He's unsure how long he stays there for, but the vestiges of the sunset have long vanished from the horizon, replaced with dull, inky blackness, when he hears a voice shout excitedly. Techno blinks, stirred from his lull, and looks down to see two familiar heads wandering around.

"Techno!" Tommy recognizes as well, stopping short. He glances uncomfortably between Tubbo, to his right, and Techno. "I didn't know you were here too."

Techno huffs. "Escaping the rest of the family, right?"

Tommy lets out a shaky laugh. "Yeah. Me too."

"I was joking."

"Oh," Tommy says. "Then I was joking too."

"Wonderful," Techno says dryly. "Glad to see we're on the same page."

Tubbo, previously unnoticed, peeps up. "Heya, Techno."

Techno gives him a wave. Tubbo mirrors it back. He has a bit of a soft spot for Tubbo, after being stuck in a shitty coffee shop off the expressway for nearly three hours.

"How are you?" Tubbo asks politely.

"Alright," Techno says, shifting his weight, "Do you two want me to leave?"

He's not blind; he knows that they probably came to this playground structure to get away from the family. Techno almost feels selfish, for keeping it to himself.

Tommy looks uncertain, face washed out by the moonlight. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Techno says, and pushes himself to his feet. "I'll leave you two alone."

As he passes, Tommy grabs his shirt sleeve.

"You, uh," he says, pauses, "It's not great at home right now."

"What?"

"They were arguing when I left," Tommy says quickly, rushing the words out like they burn him, "That's why I'm here. Phil told me I should leave."

Shit. Techno pulls his sleeve free from Tommy, whose face is drawn and pale. Tubbo stands a few steps behind him, and even though he's half a foot shorter than Tommy, he still looks as if he's guarding his best friend. Tubbo gives Techno a short, clipped nod, which Techno returns.

"I'm sure it's not that bad," Techno says, though he knows if *Tommy* is saying their argument is bad, it must be awful.

Tommy's eyes are wide and dark in the moonlight, enough warning as he'll ever give. Tubbo steps forward, tugs on his sleeve, and Tommy follows him.

Techno turns on his heel and prepares himself for home.

There's no sound; there's barely any cars on the streets. Techno unlocks the front door as quietly as possible. The metal of his key is icy to the touch. Tommy is right— they're talking to each other. At the very least, they aren't shouting, but neither voice sounds happy.

Cautiously, Techno edges around the corner of the hallway towards the dining room. He doesn't want to interrupt, and even though he knows it's wrong, a part of him wants to know what they're saying. What was so wrong between Wilbur and Phil that they waited for both Techno and Tommy to leave the house to talk about it?

Techno finds that Wilbur is seated at the dining room table, brows furrowed and eyes narrowed. His fingers tap against the table in an unsteady pattern. Phil's trying to placate him; Techno can tell by the sound of his voice.

"I think he just needs a little more time," Phil is saying, "He's still young."

"He's an adult," Wilbur retorts, "I think he's had enough time."

"People don't stop learning as soon as they turn eighteen."

"Yes, but eighteen should be old enough to know *right* from *wrong*," Wilbur says, "But clearly he doesn't. Otherwise he wouldn't be here."

"That's not a fair statement."

"Isn't it?"

"He's struggling," Phil says, "He's still a kid and he's struggling. You can't hold that against him —"

"He got *expelled*."

"And he's learning his lesson for it."

"By being coddled and babied by everyone in this family," Wilbur says. "Aren't you *angry* at him? Are you really saying that *I* shouldn't be angry?"

"You have every right to be angry, Wil, of course you do— you're paying his tuition, after all—"

"And he sent it all down the drain."

"He made a mistake and now he's paying for it. There's no point in rehashing the same argument over and over."

"He's throwing everything away!"

"He's struggling," Phil repeats, voice cold, "There's a reason for that, you know. Kids don't just struggle for no reason."

"Of *course* there's a reason. Hell, there's probably a dozen reasons. Do you want to count them? We can count them, right?"

“Wil,” Phil says, “Where are you going with this?”

“Let’s start with the fact that he’s adopted. Did you know eighty percent of children who have been through the foster system struggle with mental health? Not to mention struggle in school?”

“Of course I do,” Phil says sharply, “I raised the three of you. I’m well aware of what you went through.”

“Clearly not!” Wilbur shouts. “Not to mention *you*— you raised us, sure, but I’d rather be *anywhere* but here.”

Phil sighs, long and rigid, holding back frustration, “I know you’re saying that to make me upset, and it won’t work.”

They fall silent.

Wilbur’s footsteps pace around the room, back and forth, back and forth. There’s a thud as he slams into a chair. His voice is sharp as he says, “Maybe I had the wrong idea, coming back home.”

A tense silence fills the room.

“Aren’t you going to *say* anything to that?” Wilbur snaps. “Anything at all?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t *want* you to say anything.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“ *You’re* not making any sense!”

“Wilbur,” Phil says, patient as ever, “Stop that.”

Techno risks a glance into the dining room. Wilbur grips his hair close to his skull with a white-knuckled hand before slowly releasing. Phil’s face, drawn and nervous, loosens slightly.

“You’ll end up ripping all your hair out,” Phil tries to smile, though it falls painfully flat, “It’s not a good habit.”

“I don’t need your help.”

Phil accepts that with a quiet nod.

“ *Tommy’s* the one who really needs your help, but you won’t give it to him.”

Phil sighs. “Wilbur…”

Back and forth, back and forth. Wilbur’s feet are pacing again agitatedly.

“If you’re not careful,” Wilbur says, “He’s going to end up like Techno.”

Everything in Techno’s body freezes.

For a moment, he can hear nothing other than his breath, rushing through his ears, like the numbing sound of the tide. His heart pounds in his throat. Something sick and gritty churns its way

up from his stomach towards his mouth, tasting of bile. He swallows it down desperately, and he realizes, *they don't know I'm here.*

Wilbur keeps talking obliviously, “That’s not what I mean, but…”

He trails off.

Phil fills in the gaps, with an edge to his voice that Techno has rarely heard before: “If Tommy ends up anything close to what Techno is like now, I’ll consider it a goddamn miracle.”

Techno needs to interrupt. He needs to tell them that he’s there.

Wilbur smacks his hand against the table, and the sound echoes. “Of course you would say that.”

“Wilbur—”

“Of *course*, ” Wilbur repeats, “Because he’s the only one keeping Tommy together, right? He’s the only one keeping this family together.”

“Techno has enough on his plate without you bringing him into this.”

“You’re a real piece of work.”

“So we’re doing this, now,” Phil says, almost amusedly. “You know that you don’t need to insult me to get your point across, right?”

“You’re an asshole,” Wilbur says, breathing hard, “You’re a fucking asshole.”

Phil nods. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you need to hear it again.”

Horrible, vicious silence.

The heat of anger fades from Wilbur’s voice, replaced with the cool, sharp edge of a scalpel. Techno recognizes this tone on him, he’s heard it a million times before. Now, Wilbur is aiming to hurt. Techno knows all too well the damage that Wilbur can wreak with only his words.

“You’ve done a shit job at being a parent, by the way,” Wilbur says casually, though his words are anything but casual, “In case you were wondering.”

Phil’s expression isn’t upset, isn’t even angry. He only looks mournful. As if the person in front of him is someone he no longer recognizes.

“I know I haven’t done the best that I could,” he says matter-of-factly, “But I do try.”

“But you haven’t even tried your best,” Wilbur says. “If you did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“I’m aware.”

“If you *did* try your best,” Wilbur says, and ticks them off on his fingers, “Tommy wouldn’t be here right now, he’d be at college. I’d be... different. And Techno wouldn’t be— himself.”

Techno swallows. Something inside of him breaks away, withering in the darkness and the shame of Wilbur’s words.

“It’s not fair of you to bring Techno into this.”

Wilbur laughs humorlessly. “There you go. Defending him again.”

“It’s not fair,” Phil repeats.

“It’s *not fair* because he’s your favorite,” Wilbur says, “And don’t bother denying it. We both know it’s true.”

“This isn’t about Techno,” Phil says patiently, “And it’s not about Tommy anymore, is it? Wilbur, you’re— stop pulling at your hair, you’re hurting yourself.”

“Don’t *tell me* what to do!”

“You’re hurting yourself— please—”

“Don’t tell me— get *away* from me!” Wilbur shouts, and he shoves the chair back, and it clatters to the floor with a thunderous crash. “This isn’t about me, because I was *never* your favorite! You think I don’t know that? You think I wasn’t— I wasn’t fucking *desperate* to get out of this house for a reason?”

Phil’s voice is cool. “Please stop shouting at me.”

Wilbur sounds close to tears, voice twisted, “Fuck off!”

“Stop yelling,” Phil says calmly, “The neighbors will hear.”

“I don’t give a fuck if they do,” Wilbur snaps, “Let them! They should all know!”

Phil doesn’t bother responding to Wilbur’s last taunt. When Techno risks another glance around the corner, he only walks over to the chair that’s toppled over, and he picks it back up with slow movements. His hands are steady, unaffected.

“Why won’t you *talk back*?” Wilbur shouts, “What’s *wrong* with you?”

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Wilbur makes an incoherent sound of rage, and Phil continues, as horribly composed as he’s ever been, “I’m not going to yell at you because you want me to. You’re better than this, Wilbur.”

“This isn’t my fault!”

Calmly, Phil says, “Isn’t it?”

“What?”

“This entire conversation, you’ve been blaming things on me, on Tommy, even Techno,” Phil says, and he steps back from the chair, “Do you really think that you’re the only one who’s done nothing wrong?”

“I—” Wilbur stammers, “Of course not.”

“You left when Tommy was thirteen,” Phil says, ever patient, and his tone strikes right through Wilbur. Techno can tell. Every part of Wilbur goes still, like he’s not even there, as if he’s disconnected his mind from his body. “You weren’t here for when I had to explain to Tommy why his oldest brother wasn’t coming back home, why you wouldn’t be there for his theatre shows and for his graduation and for everything else. You weren’t here for five years, Wilbur, but you came

back and expected that nothing changed. That's selfish. You're *selfish* .”

Wilbur takes a staggering step backwards.

“This whole time you've been acting like you've never done anything wrong, but I thought I raised you better than this. I didn't raise someone who's as selfish as you.”

Wilbur doesn't move. Techno, too, feels as if all the breath have been struck right out of his chest.

And it's at that moment when Phil's gaze slides right past Wilbur, to the exact spot where Techno is standing, shadowed in the dark.

Wilbur turns, too, and everything stills.

Oh, Techno thinks, *oh, no*.

“Techno,” Phil breathes, a hopeless plea.

Techno can't move, can barely breathe. He forces his mouth to move, to say anything, and all he manages is, “Hi.”

The three of them stand there, and jerkily, Phil moves to switch on the light. It's blinding. Wilbur's still standing motionless. Techno isn't even sure if he's breathing.

“I'm sorry you had to hear that,” Phil says, though it's useless.

His lips are numb. “It's okay.”

“It's not okay,” Phil rushes, “It's not, it's— Christ. Jesus Christ.”

Wilbur asks, “How long were you listening?”

“Long enough.”

Eyes flick to each other. The entire world feels as if it has jerked to a halt in its tracks, right in front of him.

Wilbur's chest heaves. “I'm going to my room.”

He doesn't wait for a response before turning down the hallway. It's darkened, but Techno can see the way his shoulders begin shaking before he's even in the safety of his own room.

That leaves just Phil and Techno in the dining room, standing in the remnants of everything that is broken.

Phil reaches out a hand, and horribly, he tries, “Techno, are you alright?”

Techno jerks away. “Don't touch me.”

Phil's hand falls.

Techno's mind spins. “Can you— can you give me a moment?”

Phil nods unsteadily. He takes a step back. Techno rubs at his eyes, though they're dry. He doesn't feel as if he's about to start crying. He doesn't really feel anything at all.

“Are you okay?” Phil tries again.

Techno's voice is strangled, choked. "I want to be alone."

Phil nods voicelessly. He opens his mouth, and Techno doesn't know what he'll say, whether it's an apology or a confession or words of no remorse; but he doesn't hear them through the rushing in his ears either way. Techno's legs move on their own accord, and he turns down the hallway, unsure if he's swaying or standing still. His hand closes around the doorknob to his own room, about to turn, and then— Wilbur's door stands there, closed and waiting.

The decision is made before he even recognizes there was a decision in the first place.

A hasty sound comes from within after Techno knocks, the sound of someone trying to muffle the sound of sobbing. "What?"

"It's me," Techno says, "Can I come in?"

Wilbur takes another deep, gulping breath. "Um. One moment. Sure."

So Techno does, closing the door behind him. He doesn't know what he expects to see, but it certainly isn't this: Wilbur, eyes red-rimmed and puffy, sitting cross-legged on his bed, with his middle school yearbooks sprawled open in front of him.

Slowly, Techno takes a seat on the opposite end of the bed. He glances curiously at the yearbooks. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

Techno gestures for Wilbur to move over, and Wilbur obligingly does, shifting his legs so he's leaning back against the wall. When Techno shifts closer, his knee bumps against Wilbur's leg.

"Anything interesting in them?"

Wilbur shakes his head. "Nothing."

"Can I see?"

Wordlessly, Wilbur passes one of them over. It's from Wilbur's fifth grade, maybe nine or ten, and Techno was likely nearing seven at the time. This yearbook is thrown open to Wilbur's ID picture, just one among dozens of square-sized portraits, all arranged neatly in alphabetical order. That was in the months before Wilbur had been legally adopted, so his picture is located with all the D's. Wilbur Soot Doe.

Techno recalls when Wilbur had told him his name, all those years ago. He had asked, *why Soot?*

It's mine, Wilbur shrugged, I chose it.

Techno hadn't any idea why that mattered, why choosing your own name was important yet, but he still nodded.

Wilbur's picture is toothy, his eyes crinkled up at the edges. His hair had been cut short, shorn close to the scalp on both sides, and it's strange to see him without the usual curls. The collar of his polo shirt is wrinkled, and Techno has the ridiculous urge to reach through the picture and press it flat. He looks young and bright and newly minted.

Techno hardly remembers them at that age, not in distinct memories. Only in soft flashes; things like sitting together in the backseat of Phil's car as they were driven to school. Bundling up in the

winter months before leaving the house. The glow of Christmas lights through falling snow, the taste of hot cocoa that Wilbur helped Phil make when the nights were cold.

“You’re so young,” Techno breathes.

“There’s you,” Wilbur says wistfully, as he turns to the page of second graders.

In theory, Techno can recognize himself in the shape of his jaw and nose and face, and in the square glasses he still wears to this day, but when he looks at the picture of himself from nearly twenty years ago, he recognizes nothing at all.

Wilbur raises a hand to wipe at his eyes again. Techno hadn’t even realized that they were still spilling over.

“I don’t even know why I’m looking at these,” mutters Wilbur, “When you just heard everything we said. You weren’t meant to hear any of it.”

Techno doesn’t respond, and Wilbur closes the yearbook, moving to the next one. They’re older in this one. Grown into themselves more, from the little that Techno can see. When he looks at the year, he can place it easily: Wilbur would have been sixteen, Techno thirteen.

Wilbur turns his attention to the glossy pages, turning them slowly as if each one is a treasured memory, but Techno can hardly take his eyes away from Wilbur himself.

Techno isn’t disconnected enough from social media to miss the way Wilbur’s presence had exploded over the last few years. All the pictures he posts, however, are so particularly staged, so easily divisible from what reality is. But here, in his childhood bedroom, with all his old yearbooks stacked and sprawled in front of him, in a pair of ragged sweatpants close to falling apart, he merely looks human.

He looks just like Techno’s brother.

“Look,” Wilbur says, cutting through Techno’s thoughts, “Your debate trophy.”

Right in the center of the yearbook, there’s a half-page image of Techno holding a red-gold trophy. It wasn’t a real type of debate that he had been doing, of course; he had only been competing in the middle school leagues, and his interest in it had dwindled once it became clear he wasn’t bright enough to be winning anymore. But that moment is immortalized forever in this year’s yearbook: him, the trophy, a bright, grinning smile.

“You were president of the film club,” Techno says in recognition, as Wilbur turns to the next page, “That’s you.”

“This was so long ago,” Wilbur breathes, “God, I wish I could go back.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Wilbur nods. “More than anything.”

He slumps down until he’s lying flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. Ages ago, he had stuck up those greenish, tacky glow in the dark stars, the ones with five points that are cheap, plastic, and hard. They’re still up now, in the same swirling patterns they were in years ago. Techno mirrors his position until both of them are staring at the ceiling. Wilbur’s head bumps against Techno’s leg. It feels absurdly childish.

Wilbur lets out a breathless laugh. “We’ve had another conversation like this. This is familiar.”

Techno’s mind strays back to the park that one night, just over a week ago, when he and Wilbur had talked to each other on top of the playground structure. They had walked home in silence, matching footsteps in *left, right, left, right*, and then separated as soon as they entered their home.

“Nothing wrong with having a conversation twice, is there?”

“No,” Wilbur breathes, “I guess not.”

His hand twitches at his side, and without thinking twice, Techno reaches out to hold it. Wilbur grips back so fiercely that Techno’s afraid his hand may go numb.

“How are you so calm right now?” Wilbur’s voice is choked. “Why aren’t you angry?”

Techno’s stomach twists. His mouth tastes of sawdust and iron, and he shakes his head. *I don’t know.*

“When was the last time you got angry, Techno? When was the last time you really got the chance to be *upset*?”

Techno has no idea what to say. Wilbur continues, scowling, “Because I’m so angry. I’m so angry, all the time, and I don’t know why. I have nowhere to put it all because I can’t yell at you, when you’re— the way you are. And when I yell at Phil, he doesn’t respond, so it only hurts more. And yelling at Tommy is— wrong. Because he’s so young.”

“It also hurts Tommy,” Techno says, “When you yell at him. Even if he doesn’t say it.”

Wilbur nods mournfully.

“He looks up to you,” Techno adds.

“He has no idea,” Wilbur says, “He doesn’t know anything at all.”

“Do *you*?”

Wilbur pauses at that. His eyes remain fixed on the glowing stars, high above them. “I don’t,” he admits, “I don’t know anything. Not really.”

“You don’t need to know everything. You’re still learning.”

“But that’s not true,” Wilbur says, eyes flinty, “I don’t have any room to learn something because I lost my chance. I’m the one who left. Dad is right, I’m— I’m selfish. I’m rotten. Through and through.”

Wilbur’s three years older than him, but in that instant, Techno has never felt so old. Every inch of Wilbur’s body is coiled tight with tension that Techno recognizes all too well— tension that signals the fear of failure, of inadequacy. Techno recognizes it on himself when he wakes up each morning, stares at himself in the mirror, and wonders if he recognizes who looks back at him.

Now Wilbur wears the mantle of inferiority. As if it’s a second skin, one he can slip on without any thought. How long has he been wearing it?

“I don’t think you are,” Techno tries.

“You’re lying.”

The words feel funny in Techno's mouth, but he continues, "You've done great things. I just don't think you know how much this family needs you."

"It sounds like the last five years were fine without me," Wilbur says, "And he's right. I missed everything because I was— wrapped up in my own shit, not thinking about anything else. None of that matters. All those big projects I keep working on— but they're all meaningless."

"That's not true."

"Phil called me when I was at the Oscars," Wilbur mutters, "I thought he was proud of me then. But he wasn't."

Techno doesn't know what to say. Wilbur's in his own head, and he keeps talking, not even checking if Techno is listening. "I knew I wouldn't win, then. I knew I wouldn't be the one up there. But I still had this hope— I had this big dream that maybe if I did, I'd be worth a damn to him. But I didn't win, and I came home, and I'm still the same. Nothing has changed."

His throat clicks as he swallows. There's so much lurking beneath Wilbur's words, but the only thing Techno manages to focus on is, "Tell me more about them."

Wilbur turns. "The Oscars?"

Techno nods.

Wilbur swallows. "It was decent, I suppose. There's so much preparing in advance that it's more stressful than it's worth— there's unspoken rules for what to wear and how to dress and when to arrive—"

"Skip all of that," Techno says, "Tell me about the event itself."

Wilbur pauses, collecting his thoughts. It takes him ages to speak.

"It's noisy and crowded," he murmurs, and the moment he begins speaking, the bedroom around them falls away. "It takes an hour to walk the length of the red carpet. Everywhere you look, someone is calling your name. They all love you. There's so many lights that it's magical."

His eyes are glazed over with glow in the dark stars, transformed into the swirling galaxy, breaking free from the ceiling. Wilbur presses a hand to his chest, as if he's still in the midst of that night. Techno follows the movement.

"I had my speech right here, right against my heart," Wilbur reminisces, "Just in case I won, but I knew I wouldn't. The show itself is boring, endless, but the anxiety you feel when you're waiting for your name to be announced— my pulse was so fast. It felt like I was dying."

"I remember music, throughout everything. Kissing celebrities' cheeks, and they kiss yours. The afterparties are all a mess of champagne and color. Everyone knows who everyone is, and it's so bright that I have to squint, because everyone around me is glowing."

There's something irresistible about Wilbur that pulls people in, dragging them, helpless and unresisting. The way he talks, the way he tells stories, the way he moves, all make it impossible to not listen.

Wilbur trails off.

Eyes shining, "I was glowing, too."

“That’s nice,” Techno breathes.

“It’s wonderful,” Wilbur says, “I think about it all the time. The nerves. The colors. The greatest thing is that you go once, you go every year. They all remember you. They all want you there.”

“It sounds like one hell of a drug.”

Wilbur laughs, choked. “It is.”

“And you’re addicted.”

“I think I am.”

The colors of the galaxy, earth-shattering and bright, fade away. The greenish glow of the stars come back, winking into vision. The bedroom walls creep back up until the two of them are lying on their backs once more in Wilbur’s childhood bedroom, surrounded by the same, frozen memories of home.

“Tell me more,” Techno says. “I want to hear it all.”

So Wilbur does. He starts off slow, hesitant, as if he’s unveiling a piece of his soul to the world, before his ideas pick up speed. The words unfurl from him like he’s painting a masterpiece. His voice is hushed, but it’s the loudest thing Techno’s ever heard as he talks about the main characters and the plot and the way it’ll span seasons, across years of time, and he talks about how this is his project, one that was born from the depths of his curiosity and the desire to be a storyteller. He talks until the glow in the dark stars have started to fade, and he talks until the moon has hit its peak in the night sky. He talks until his voice runs too hoarse to speak much longer.

After ages, he says, “Sorry I talked for so long.”

“It’s fine,” Techno says. “It sounds like you needed it.”

Wilbur makes a listless noise. He squeezes Techno’s hand tighter.

There is so much Techno wants to say to him, and no way to say it. He wants to tell him that Wilbur is a shit brother and an awful friend, that he’s a terrible person for leaving them. That he’s coming back home and trying to fix things as best as he can, and it’s still not enough. That it might never be enough. That Techno hates him and loves him with all his heart, and he doesn’t know what to do about it.

The only thing he says is, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Wilbur breathes. “I missed you so much. You have no idea how much I miss you.”

“I’m glad you’re home,” Techno says, as honest as he’s ever been.

“Me too.” Wilbur blinks, as if he’s fighting back tears. “I got so caught up in the whirlwind of everything that I forgot who I was.”

His head leans against Techno’s shoulder, and Techno shifts so his arm is around Wilbur, and Wilbur closes his eyes.

He whispers, “I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

They stay there, leaning into each other as if they’re children again. It takes ages for Wilbur’s

breathing evens out slowly until Techno is certain that he's fast asleep. His own mind, however, is spinning wildly, and Techno has the distinct sense that he'll witness the sun rise when the morning arrives.

He can't stop thinking that all of his life, Techno has always been the mediator.

It's a role that's unique to being both a middle child and the oldest child. He's always been the one to calm down arguments between siblings when Phil was unable to, the one who comforted Tommy when he was down, the one who listened to Wilbur when he was frustrated. He's always been the one who goes to Phil when everyone else refuses to listen.

A hollow ache spreads throughout Techno's body. The black abyss inside him only worsens, carving deeper, reminding him that he's only useful for making other people feel better. He might as well forget completely about himself.

Techno's exhausted.

And as hard as he tries, he's unable to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

as always, if you enjoyed, please leave kudos/comments, i love to hear your thoughts and reactions <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The night before Wilbur leaves, everything comes to a head.

Chapter Notes

apologies that this update is a little later than usual, i had a family commitment that i couldn't miss and that delayed posting times. regardless i hope you enjoy the final chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They don't talk about it.

He finally falls asleep, and Wilbur wakes up silently before Techno does. They don't talk about it then. They part, go to their separate rooms, go about their morning routines. They don't talk about it then. Tommy wakes up, oblivious to the tension, makes himself breakfast. Phil is soon to follow. They don't talk about it.

The closest they get to talking is Tommy asking, mouth full, "You're all being quiet today."

A quick glance. "We're not."

"Yes, you are," accuses Tommy, "You're being silent and *suspicious*."

None of them speak. Tommy looks between the three of them until his expression darkens.

"Fine," he scowls, "Keep your secrets. See if I care."

The tension of this morning isn't a new experience. Techno and Wilbur would get in arguments often when they were younger. It was a common scene between the two of them, particularly after Tommy arrived and Phil's attention was newly divided among three instead of two. Wilbur would be left in angry, frustrated tears. Techno turned cold, upset, and closed off. In the mornings, though, they never talked about it. It simply went forgotten and unnoticed, until the wound healed over.

This morning feels eerily reminiscent of those teenage years, particularly as Techno stands in the kitchen, stock-still, his cup of coffee growing steadily colder by the minute. It takes him a few moments before he realizes that his gaze has been fixed on nothing in particular, and for the life of him, he can't recall at all what the last ten minutes of his life contained. He almost presses a hand to his chest before he realizes the pain he's feeling isn't physical at all.

Tommy finishes his breakfast in silence and stalks past Techno on his way to the sink. He brushes his shoulder against Techno's, jolting him backwards.

"Tommy," Phil says, but Tommy's glare only deepens, and he shoves his way past Phil, too.

Phil glances between Tommy and Techno and Wilbur. For a brief minute, Techno entertains the possibility of opening a conversation about it. But what would he even say? *Wilbur, did you mean what you said that Tommy would become like me? Phil, did you mean it when you said Wilbur cared only about himself? Were you both telling the truth?*

The strange thing about anger is that for some people, they say things they don't mean, but for others, anger peels away the lies, revealing the raw, vulnerable truth beneath it. The things that are said in the heat of the moment are the same things that are thought silently in everyday life, the same things that Techno believed would never be said out loud.

How is he supposed to do this?

But Phil doesn't press either of them to speak, and turns away after agonizing silence. They don't talk about it that morning, and as only he and Wilbur are left in the recesses of the kitchen, Techno has the awful feeling that they'll never talk about it again.

Wilbur clears his throat. "Did you get any sleep?"

Techno's coffee has gone cold. "I got enough."

"And— are you feeling— okay?"

"I'm fine," he says, which is a lie.

"Really?"

"Of course."

Wilbur's lips thin into a smile. He doesn't look happy at all. "Good."

Techno keeps his gaze focused on the floor. He can tell that Wilbur wants to talk to him, but Techno would like nothing less.

Still, his mind helpfully regurgitates the image of Wilbur's face last night, soft and hopeful and worn down with stress and time. The way his eyes had reflected the stars above them, green and brackish in their glow, and how the bedroom had transformed around them whenever he spoke. The way he had seemed so eager, so burnt out, so desperate to fix things.

Techno swallows and says, "I got a call from the mechanic this morning."

"Mm?"

"The car's ready to be picked up."

"Hm."

"I need someone to drive me there."

"I can," Wilbur says.

A moment of brittle silence.

"Alright," Techno says, "We can go right now."

He pours his coffee down the sink, goes to grab his coat from his room. The fog outside is damp and wet, thick enough that Techno feels as if he could push through it with his hands. Wilbur joins

him at the front door and unlocks Phil's car. It's a much older copy of the sedan that had broken down by the side of the road, and rarely used; it takes Wilbur three tries to start the ignition. In silence, he turns out onto the suburb streets.

"I slept fine," Wilbur says, almost an afterthought to their conversation. "In case you were wondering."

"Ah."

"It was..." He trails off. "It was nice."

It sounds strange on his tongue, as if tact and gentleness are skills Wilbur has not used in years.

Techno has no idea what Wilbur wants him to respond, or if he wants Techno to respond at all. Because Wilbur may have slept fine, but their conversation and the argument beforehand had birthed something inside of Techno, something slippery and riotous. It curls around his stomach, gnawing at his insides. He wants to tear it out as one would with a weed, pulling it out by the roots.

"And I think I'll talk to Phil," Wilbur adds uncertainly, "If he wants to listen."

"Mm."

"I don't know if he will."

"Mm."

"Techno," Wilbur says, "Can't you— won't you say—"

A heavy sigh. "What do you want me to say?"

Wilbur's eyes never once stray from the road. "I don't know."

"We never talk about arguments," says Techno, "Let's not start now."

"But—"

"Merge left," Techno interrupts. "You're going to miss the turn-off."

Wilbur shifts into the next lane over. He pulls into the parking lot of the mechanic in the next minute, and without wasting a second, Techno wrenches the door open. Something's burning inside of him. Something hurts. He wants to scream or cry or throw something or do *anything* besides bottling up every word that's ever been spoken.

Breathe, he thinks viciously, and receives his car keys from the mechanic. Wilbur's eyes watch him from the parking lot. For all Wilbur's skill with speaking, he says more with his gaze than words ever will.

They drive home in separate cars, and Techno drives home in silence.

Phil, for all his obliviousness earlier in life, is not blind to the tension between them. He drags Techno out the next day to the deli, early on a Tuesday morning. They find themselves ordering

sandwiches at eleven, in the hour before the rush of lunch. Phil directs the two of them towards an open table in the corner, next to a poster of Dolly Parton and a wide window. Sunlight filters in.

Techno expects Phil to talk about everything, but thankfully, he doesn't. He says instead, "Did you hear they're closing in a few weeks?"

Techno frowns. "Really?"

Phil gestures towards the sign plastered on the front door. Techno doesn't know how he missed it walking in, but now he reads it backwards, squinting slightly.

The deli is closing in a month's time. It makes something cold sink into Techno's chest, burrowing and rooting deeper.

"That's sad," he says, although he isn't feeling very sad at all, "I like this place."

"I'm sure something equally as good will take its place," Phil says. "Right?"

That's what happened to the taco place two years ago, and the boutique before that. They were all one-off shops, small businesses instead of chains, but they closed while Techno was away at college. The sidewalks that had held his footsteps had transformed into a place that didn't know his name. The oak trees that dropped acorns in the summer and caterpillars in the spring had fallen; the bookstore Techno had spent his middle school winters at had vanished, to be replaced with a chain coffee shop that could be found on any city street.

"Sure," Techno says, and the next bite of the sandwich tastes like sawdust in his mouth.

Phil looks at him carefully. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Of course I am," Techno says.

"You seem—"

"Stress," Techno says, "Applications. Work. Life. Moving."

"It'll be strange to have you move away, you know."

"I've already moved away," Techno says, "I was at college for four years."

"This is different."

"I'm going to come back. It's not like I'm gone forever."

"You know what I mean."

"Plus you still have Tommy," Techno says, an ugly tone to his voice, "I'm not exactly necessary, am I?"

Phil's eyes are concerned and upset, "Techno, you know what I mean. I only meant— having an apartment of your own is a big step. That's all I meant."

Orders 51 and 52! A shout comes from the kitchen.

Techno stands up abruptly. "I'll grab it."

"I can—"

“It’s fine,” Techno says jerkily, and pushes himself up before Phil has the chance to keep him there any longer. He returns a few moments later, prays that his father is smart enough to drop the conversation before it can morph into something much worse.

He sits back down. Passes Phil his plate. They eat in silence.

Phil says, a tentative note of hope, “I called the financial aid office this morning. Tommy’s tuition won’t have to be paid in full.”

“That’s nice.”

“It’s good news,” adds Phil, “I was thinking of letting Tommy know later today.”

“He’d probably appreciate it.”

Phil nods. “And I feel— he needs some good news.”

Techno doesn’t respond. He takes another bite of his sandwich, chews, swallows. They chose to sit by the windows, but a strip of sunlight is falling across his face, highlighting one of his eyes, and Techno wants to duck away. It makes an uncomfortable itch crawl across his skin.

Awkwardly, Phil says, “Can I talk to you about something?”

At Techno’s muted nod, he says, “Something more serious.”

The strip of sunlight marking his face, the taste of mustard in his sandwich, and Techno hates mustard, he had asked for them to leave it off but they must have gotten his order wrong, the way his knee is jittering underneath the table, unable to stop. He nods again.

Phil takes a deep breath, “I want to apologize.”

“Apologize,” echoes Techno.

“For everything I said a few days ago. It’s been on my mind. I haven’t stopped thinking about it, and I want to say sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Techno tries, but Phil winces at his words. That alone makes Techno feel as if his world has shifted on its axis one degree too far.

“I want to, though,” Phil explains, “The things that we said about you— especially me— weren’t fair. And I hope you know that— when people are angry, they say things that they don’t mean. I’m not proud of what I said to Wilbur. I should have done better.”

Techno nods faintly.

“I’m your parent,” says Phil, and it almost sounds like he believes the repetition will make him believe it more, “I need to do better, and I should have been better.”

Techno doesn’t know what Phil *wants* from him here. Whether he wants an acceptance of his apology or simply for Techno to listen, or whether he wants them to keep sitting there, even when the crowd is starting to grow and there’s more *noises* and Techno feels like he can hear every scuff of each shoe on the linoleum floor.

“Thank you,” Techno manages, strangled, and he isn’t sure whether he even wants to hear Phil’s watery, awkward apology. What he does want is to *leave*, and Phil isn’t grasping that.

“Techno?” Phil says carefully. “Are you alright?”

“I’m *fine*,” Techno grits, “I appreciate the apology. I just can’t hear it right now. Not when everything is so—”

He waves a hand inarticulately. Phil can’t possibly understand everything swarming in his head, but he nods, like he does.

“And it means a lot,” Techno continues, words tripping over themselves, “What you said, but— it’s so much easier if we just never address it, and I don’t feel like— like *ripping* open a scab today, especially not when he’s leaving in two days, and I’d rather just have a quiet lunch out with my dad. With no family arguments. And no drama. And no talk about— about tuition and money and moving and Tommy and Wilbur. Just normal things.”

He has his gaze firmly focused on the table by the end of his words and his eyes burn. His knee keeps moving, enough that even Phil has noticed his restlessness. Phil’s hand twitches, like he wants to place it on top of Techno. Still him. Keep him steady.

“I can do that,” Phil says eventually, voice quiet, “We can talk about whatever you want. I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

Techno nods. He can’t find his voice.

“What *do* you want to talk about?”

He wants to talk about a dozen different things. That the deli is going to close in a month, and Techno won’t be there to see it happen. That he misses that peach tree— it was the first tree he learned how to climb, and still in his sleep, Techno can recall the exact way that the bark felt beneath his fingertips. And a million more things, said in a thousand different ways. What *do* normal, functional families talk about? Techno has no idea.

“The weather,” he settles on.

Phil doesn’t push. Doesn’t prod. Only says, “It’s nice that today is sunny. I don’t miss the rain at all.”

They finish their lunch in bland conversation, which tastes nearly as stale as Techno’s food does. Phil rises from his seat to throw away the remainder, and he leaves a neat tip behind. On the way back to the car, the world quiets an absurd amount, away from the laughing, chattering tables inside. Even the sunlight lightens up in its angry glare as a cloud passes over the sun.

On the drive on the way home, Techno angles himself so he’s turned away from Phil in the driver’s seat as he opens up a search engine. There’s a decision curling at the edges of his mind, one that he’s thought about, but has never taken a step towards.

“I’m going to make a call,” he says, when Phil pulls into the driveway, “Go inside, I’ll be there in a moment.”

Phil looks uncertain, but he nods regardless. He likely still feels that he’s walking on eggshells, after that apology and the response and the entirety of the last hour and a half. Both he and Techno are aching aware of the tension between them.

The car door slams. Techno scans through the extremely brief list of numbers he had looked up during the drive, and calls the first one as soon as Phil vanishes indoors.

The line beeps for an agonizing fifteen seconds before there's a high-pitched *beep!* from the other end, and he sucks in a deep breath, not sure why he's so scared.

"Hi," he starts, the monologue he had practiced in his head throughout the entire drive home, "My name is Techno. I'm calling to see if you have any therapy availability."

Suddenly and without warning, Wilbur's last night at home is upon them. They have a family dinner that night, because Phil demands that all four of them should be together before they're split again. This means, unfortunately, that Tommy is upset, which primes the entire night for failure.

"I had plans with Tubbo," he complains, "We were going to the theaters— tickets are so expensive, I really don't have to be here—"

"Wilbur's leaving tomorrow," Phil says shortly, "We're eating dinner as a family. Tubbo can wait."

"I don't even care that Wilbur's leaving," scowls Tommy, under his breath, and only Techno is keen-eared enough to pick up on it. He makes sure to jostle Tommy as he passes him in the kitchen, and narrowly misses Tommy's stuck-out foot, attempting to trip him.

"Tommy," Phil reprimands. That only makes Tommy's frown curve downwards more.

Instead of cooking, Phil offers Wilbur the chance to eat whatever he wants, and Wilbur selects Chinese food. Techno pulls Tommy out the door to go pick their order up, and the two of them return with arms full of rice and steamed vegetables. Tommy, scowl still painted firmly on his face, unloads red and white boxes onto the dinner table.

"Lighten up," Wilbur says.

Tommy places down a carton of rice with such force that he spills a water glass. "Don't tell me what to do."

"You're acting like—"

"Stop telling me that I'm acting like a child," Tommy snaps, "Shut up, won't you?"

Wilbur's eyebrows crawl up his forehead. Phil stills. Techno keeps his head determinedly down and reminds himself that it's not worth his interference.

"Sorry," Wilbur finally says.

Tommy shrugs, shoulders tight. "Whatever."

The moment passes, but the tension remains.

Phil does his best to break it: "Do you need someone to drive you to the airport tomorrow?"

"I can call a taxi."

"Don't be stupid," Techno interrupts, "I'll drive you."

Wilbur makes a muttered noise of assent, and doesn't say anything further.

Tommy pipes up, "When's your flight?"

"Two fifteen."

"So— you're leaving by one?"

"Twelve thirty," Phil corrects.

Wilbur shoots him a look. "That's so early. I don't need to leave that early."

"It's a thirty minute drive there, fifteen minutes to check bags, thirty minutes to get through security, and then half an hour for buffer room."

"That's— it's only thirty minutes there if there's *traffic*. There's no traffic on Fridays."

"Well, you'd rather be early than late, right?"

"I'll be sitting there for hours."

"Wilbur, come on."

"I'll leave at one thirty if you keep pushing me," Wilbur says coolly.

"I don't want you to miss your flight!"

Wilbur and Phil keep bickering, and Tommy kicks Techno underneath the table. Techno kicks him back. This argument is all so pointless.

"Anyway," Tommy interrupts loudly, "Anything else going on today? Anything at all? Because if I have to listen to the two of you fight one more time this week I might seriously lose my mind."

Phil takes a deep breath in, curbing his frustration. "You're right. It's not a big deal, I just think your brother is being—"

"I'm *not*."

"Historically you haven't been the most *on time*," Tommy points out.

Wilbur rounds on him. "You said that you wanted to drop this topic."

"I do! I'm only pointing out the truth."

"You're a gremlin."

"You're a—" Tommy searches valiantly for a worse word— "You're an idiot!"

"Real mature."

"Oh, shut up."

"Tommy," Phil reprimands, "No fighting, alright?"

"But you were—"

"Tommy," Phil says sharply, and Tommy's ears go bright red.

“No fighting,” he mocks under his breath, as he stabs chopsticks into the closest carton of noodles, “No fighting, right? But a few days ago that didn’t seem to bother you—”

“You weren’t even here for that,” Wilbur says, tone ugly. “I told you to leave. We don’t need to bring that up constantly.”

“*Constantly?* It’s been brought up once!”

“Tommy,” Wilbur warns, and Tommy’s ears redden even further.

“You always do this,” he scowls, “You and Dad, you’re always so annoying. You know what? I’m glad you’re leaving. Good riddance.”

Stay silent, Techno reminds himself, because every time he gets involved, it chips away at himself. There’s no point. It’s not worth it. It’s not worth it, even when he can see the situation unfold in slow motion, can almost envision the future in front of him: Tommy, bursting out in horrible need of attention, Wilbur transforming into that cold, haughty version of himself, Phil torn between the two and not sure what to do—

“Tommy,” Techno interrupts quietly, before Wilbur has the chance to say anything further, “Calm down. It’s not worth it.”

Tommy rounds on him, fully prepared to snap something back, before he swallows hard, grits his teeth, and sits back down in his chair. He clenches his chopsticks so hard that Techno’s afraid they’re going to snap.

“Let’s have a regular quiet dinner,” Techno continues, “Can we do that? For once?”

There’s uncomfortable, brittle silence.

“Fine,” Wilbur says eventually, his words splintered. “Sorry.”

“You are real shit at apologies,” Tommy mutters.

Techno kicks him.

“Stop that.”

“You’re all treating me like I’m the baby,” Tommy scowls, “But I’m an adult, alright? I can make my own decisions.”

“No one’s saying you can’t,” Techno tries to explain, “Just—”

“We can treat you like an adult, if you want,” Wilbur says, voice cold, “Would that make you feel better?”

“Guys,” Techno tries again, and a headache threatens to overcome his temples, “I don’t want to deal with this tonight.”

“Right,” Wilbur scoffs, “As if you’re not as bad as the rest of us.”

It’s a one-off comment. It’s not meant to hurt. It’s not meant to be cruel, but—

Techno snaps.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he bursts. “Wilbur, what the *fuck?*”

Wilbur pauses, frozen. “Techno, I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t mean *what*?” Techno bites out. “Didn’t mean what you said? Didn’t mean when you said that I— that Tommy was going to end up like me?”

All three of them stare at him with wide, shocked eyes. The words spill from Techno’s chest, and he was right— anger peels away every jagged barrier. He’s barely aware of what he’s saying, and some cruel, hidden part of him wants to *hurt*— wants to make them feel everything that he’s felt.

“I’m trying my best to stop you from tearing each other apart every chance you get,” he snaps, “But I’m sick and tired of acting like the family therapist. I’m done with being the person you come to, the person you use in your arguments— so solve your fucking problems without me.”

“Techno,” Tommy gasps, face pale.

“You are all horrible,” Techno grits, “Leave me the fuck alone.”

Righteous anger blazes through him in a horrific fire, scorching and consuming all that he is. He doesn’t want to see Wilbur, he certainly doesn’t want to see Phil, and he doesn’t think that he can even allow Tommy close. Techno shoves his chair back and storms away.

He bursts out onto the back porch and finally feels as if he can take a solid breath in.

In, out. In, out. He pulls his knees to his chest, staring out at the garden. That stupid fucking garden. Phil’s trimmed it down in the past few days. There’s no more overgrown, leafy plants. It’s bare now. It makes him want to throw up.

His hand is jittering because his body recognizes that he always goes to the back porch for a cigarette, but he doesn’t have any with him right now. He doesn’t dare to go back inside— to get to his room he would have to pass by the dining room. He wants to cry, so desperately. He wants to scream. He wants to do something drastic. Something *monumental*.

He doesn’t do anything monumental, though. He merely sits outside in perfect, complete stillness.

The worst thing about this situation is that they’re not going to talk about it. Because they never addressed the last big argument they had, and they’ll never get the chance to talk about this argument either.

There’s a creaking sound from behind him, and Techno turns. His eyes burn, and Techno realizes that he has been crying. He presses his hands to his eyes and attempts to wipe away the tears, but he can’t wipe away the red-rimmed circles.

Thankfully, it’s not Wilbur or Phil who step out onto the porch. It’s Tommy.

Tommy, who is wearing a winter coat and with another one slung over his arm.

“Thank you,” Techno says numbly, and takes his own coat from Tommy’s outstretched hand.

Tommy says nothing, only sits down next to him. His knee bumps against Techno’s incessantly until Techno gets the hint and straightens his spine.

“It’s quiet in there,” Tommy says eventually. “Phil and Wilbur are cleaning up. Dad is pretty upset with him. But I think he’s also upset with himself.”

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” Techno says hoarsely.

“I thought you might want to know. Sorry if you don’t.”

“Mm.”

“I *am* glad he’s leaving,” Tommy says, after a moment, “I don’t want Wilbur here.”

“At least we’re both leaving too,” Techno reminds him. “Next semester, right?”

Tommy nods. He doesn’t look particularly excited.

Slowly, “*Are* you going back to college anytime soon?”

“Maybe,” Tommy fidgets, “I know I have to.”

“You don’t *have* to.”

“But I do, Techno,” Tommy sighs, “Phil would kill me if I dropped out. Plus when I was talking to the dean, it was all with the idea that I was going to come back in the spring. So I can’t ignore that now. Because I’m not *permanently* suspended, only for this semester.”

“So you’re planning on going back,” Techno surmises, and Tommy nods. He seems miserable about it.

“Sorry,” Tommy says, “I don’t mean to just— dump all of this on you. You just shouted about people doing that, so. I feel bad for doing it now.”

“It’s fine,” Techno says, and he means it. “It’s different when it’s you.”

Tommy cracks a smile. Techno shoulders him, and Tommy bumps his shoulder back.

“Besides,” Techno adds, “You still haven’t told me why you got expelled in the first place, have you?”

His tone is lighthearted, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

“I told Phil,” he says, “But I haven’t told everyone else. Do you really want to know? I didn’t tell you at first because I thought you would be upset with me, and— when I first got back home, I wasn’t in the mood to be shouted at for everything.”

“I want to know.”

“Would it make you feel better?”

Tommy’s eyes are keen and perceiving. Techno isn’t sure, but he nods regardless. A distraction would be nice.

So Tommy clears his throat, braces his chin on his knees, and looks out onto the yard. “It was all a big misunderstanding.”

“Mm.”

“The guy was saying shit to me and some of my friends, and I wasn’t going to let that slide.”

“Mm.”

“So I hit him.”

“Mm.”

“And... I suppose it got out of hand.”

“Well?” Techno asks. “Did you win?”

Tommy grins crookedly. “Course I won. Phil didn’t make me take all those stupid boxing classes for no reason, right?”

For all his joking, something dark lurks beneath his tone. Techno gets the awful sense that Tommy isn’t telling him everything. Lord knows that Techno got into his fair share of fistfights, both in high school and in university, and that isn’t enough to warrant being expelled for the entire semester.

“What else?” he asks, and Tommy ducks his head.

“There may have also been some illegal substances in my dorm room.”

Techno’s eyebrows raise. “How illegal?”

“Just alcohol.”

Techno fills in the rest of the comment for him. “You were smoking out your friends? Really, Tommy?”

“Hey!” Tommy protests, face flushed bright red, “I’m not an idiot, I wasn’t expecting them to actually *search* my room. And, well, freshman housing is supposed to be substance-free, and I met with the dean that afternoon, and...”

He makes a wide gesture with his hands, and Tommy nods.

“So they’re letting you go back next semester?”

Tommy nods. He looks tired, now that he’s told Techno, looks far older than his eighteen years.

“But you don’t want to go back,” Techno fills in.

Again, Tommy nods.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Tommy sighs, “I didn’t like it very much. I didn’t like my classes. I didn’t like my professors. It wasn’t fun.”

“You were only there for two weeks,” Techno says. “That isn’t much time at all.”

“I know,” Tommy huffs. “But it wasn’t like what you and Wil talked about at all.”

“You know that Wilbur is a special case,” Techno says. “No one is like him.”

“But I want to be like him,” Tommy says petulantly.

“You shouldn’t. You can be whoever you want to be.”

“That’s not it,” Tommy sighs. He waves a hand, looking for words. “Sometimes, it feels like people see me but they don’t see *me*, they see Wilbur.”

“You made friends,” Techno asks, “Right?”

Tommy’s ears are bright red. “Three different people stopped talking to me because I told them I wouldn’t give them Wilbur’s number.”

“Oh.”

“And even two of my professors asked if he was my brother,” Tommy scowls, “I had friends, sure, but there was always something... something off about them.”

Techno swallows. Tommy’s shoulders begin to shake. “Oh,” he says again, feeling stupid for not being able to comfort him.

“I just missed Tubbo,” Tommy continues, “All of them at college are nothing compared to him, and I knew that I wouldn’t be seeing Tubbo for the next few months if I stayed, and...”

“Tommy,” Techno says, as gently as possible, “Did that guy really antagonize you?”

Tommy buries his face in his knees.

Carefully, Techno says, “Did you get into that fight on purpose?”

Tommy slowly nods.

“Oh, Tommy,” Techno sighs, “You really missed everyone, didn’t you?”

“Tubbo,” Tommy says, “You, dad. Wilbur.”

Heart in throat: “We really missed you too.”

“Really? Because when I came back, everyone was so— it was—”

“We were angry,” Techno explains, feeling like he’s doing more harm than good by saying that, because Tommy only curls in more, “But Phil is glad to have you back, even if he says that he’s disappointed. And I know for sure that home wasn’t the same without you.”

“I hate college,” Tommy mutters.

“College is important,” Techno says softly. “There’s more to life than family, you know.”

“I know,” Tommy says. “I know, I know, I know.”

Everything he wants to say is held back, about to burst like a dam overflowing with water. Techno patiently waits. He knows that Tommy will talk when he’s comfortable.

“It was so *perfect*,” Tommy says eventually. “All I had to do was goad him on a little bit, and boom. Punch thrown. He called me a few names, I called him a few names, and then all there was to do was winning the fight. And it was mostly for stress relief, I guess, even though I *know* I shouldn’t do that, and *stop giving me that look, I know I was wrong*, and the next thing I knew, I was heading home.”

“Manipulative to the core,” Techno guesses.

“It’s not my fault I’m so good at it,” Tommy scowls.

“Phil would be very upset if he heard you saying that.”

Tommy glowers at him. “Well, I’m assuming you’re not going to tell on me.”

“I won’t.”

Carefully, Tommy says, “Well— is it wrong?”

“Of course,” Techno says. He isn’t going to sugarcoat it.

Tommy looks frustrated. “People always say I’m too manipulative for my own good. And it’s terrible because I can tell when people are being manipulative back, like at university. I could tell what people just wanted to use me because there was a big name in my family, and I could tell who was bothered by it versus who wasn’t.” Tommy props his chin up on his knee. His lower lip juts out. “I guess I know people too well.”

A breath, and then:

“I just wanted Wilbur back home,” Tommy says, the most obvious non-sequitur, and everything clicks all at once.

The terrible, awful jealousy that eats away at Tommy from the inside out, going unnoticed by everyone except for himself. The anger at seeing people who he’s close to ignore him, or even worse— forget about him. The deep, innate knowledge of one’s siblings that comes with years of being together. The uncomfortable realization that *if I can’t get him back by being the best student I can be, maybe being the worst will do*. Everything playing out, for a million different reasons, and finally culminating in a plane ticket being bought for home.

Oh, Techno thinks, and valiantly pulls himself back together.

Tommy’s head is still ducked, but Techno shoulders him, hard. “You’re the dumbest person I’ve ever met in my life.”

Tommy sighs, like it’s what he was expecting.

“You’re such an idiot,” continues Techno. “There’s better ways to talk to Wilbur than jeopardizing your academic future. For fuck’s sake. Call him. Keep calling him if you don’t get through. *I* would have called if you had asked, you know he listens to me.”

“Does he?”

“I would have made him,” Techno says seriously. “You know I would.”

Tommy doesn’t look like he believes him, but Techno is fine with that.

“And you’re going back next semester,” Techno states, “And you’re going to finish your degree, and you’re going to do great things, and I don’t care what anyone else thinks about you.”

Tommy’s smile is slow and watery, and he presses both hands over his eyes. He sniffs, hard, and says, “You’re doing it again, you know.”

“Doing what?”

“What you said inside,” Tommy says, voice muffled, “Being the family therapist. Solving problems. Christ, I didn’t want to make you do this, I only wanted to *talk*, I wanted to— distract you, I guess, but it turned into solving my problems again. I’m sorry. I’m really fucking sorry.”

“I already told you,” Techno says, though some part of him is warmed by Tommy’s words, “It’s

different when it's you."

Tommy shakes his head. "I really liked what you said. It really means a lot. But I wish it didn't have to be *you* who says it."

They sit there, knees bumping, close enough that Techno can feel the way Tommy's chest rises and falls in unison with his own.

Finally, Tommy asks, "Are you going to tell Wilbur? About it being on purpose?"

Techno shakes his head.

"Phil?"

Techno shakes his head.

Tommy nods, pale and determined. "And I'm going to stop— using you. I'll make them stop, too. Stop treating you like you're not there."

Techno swallows. "I'd appreciate that."

Tension uncurls from Tommy's shoulders. He holds out his finger. "Swear on it?"

Techno locks pinkies with him.

They stay there for a breath, in and out, and then they break apart.

Morning dawns over the Watson household, cold and tremulous with anticipation. Techno and Wilbur brush their teeth next to each other in the bathroom and barely look at each other the entire time. Techno wonders if his outburst last night will end up the same way as all other outbursts: ignored, silent, and not talked about.

But Wilbur says tersely, before Techno turns to leave, "I'm sorry."

Techno has a feeling that it's the closest to a sincere apology Wilbur will ever get. He nods shortly, and the day continues.

Time seems to bend forward, minutes draining away with startling speed. In what seems like a matter of seconds, Wilbur's hauling his duffel bag to the car and sliding into the passenger seat. Techno is driving him; Phil offered as well, but Wilbur staunchly refused.

Just Techno is fine, he said, I don't need the rest of the family along.

"Phil was right," Techno says, as he starts the car, "You are going to be late, your flight boards in an hour and it takes thirty minutes to get to the airport—"

"In *traffic*," Wilbur sighs, "It's the morning, there'll be no cars in the way. We'll get there in ten minutes and I'll spend half an hour waiting by the gate. I have time."

Techno sighs, and he begins driving.

The airport is cool and still at this hour in the day, though Techno would have expected the opposite from Friday at noon. Wilbur was right after all— there was no traffic on the drive, and there's barely anyone by check-in. There's only a small crowd around security.

Wilbur heads directly for priority boarding and comes back a few minutes later with a boarding pass, neatly marked with black ink. Without missing a beat, he heads towards the security line, before pausing and turning back.

The two brothers stand there. Techno almost wants to take a step back. To see if he can recreate those bittersweet moments between the two of them. To see if they'll still be the same ten feet apart, twenty, a few hundred miles across the country. Will these three weeks have changed anything, or will everything still remain the same?

"I guess I should go," Wilbur says.

Techno nods.

Still, neither of them move.

Wilbur's hand tightens around his backpack, and he turns to look at the gate. The clock ticks down and he slowly takes a first step, and Techno's hand shoots out to grab him by the sleeve of his coat.

"Wait," Techno blurts, "I'm going to set down a few ground rules with you."

Wilbur nods.

"One," Techno counts off on his fingers as he goes, "You call Tommy. Every single week. No exceptions."

"Even if—"

"Even if he doesn't pick up," Techno says, "You still call him."

He's slightly gratified to see the way Wilbur swallows, throat clicking. "Okay."

"And two," Techno says, "You won't abandon us again. You can't."

Wilbur nods again.

"I don't give a damn how busy you are or how much you have going on," Techno continues, "We're family. You make time for family."

Wilbur nods again, looking a little less pale. "Okay."

"And when you come back—" Techno glances over him— "Drop the sunglasses. And the coat. And whatever attitude you bring back. Stop saying things that you know will hurt us. I don't care about Wilbur Soot. I care about Wilbur Doe. About that stupid kid who told me he had named himself *Soot*."

Something cracks behind Wilbur's eyes, jagged and sorrowful.

But in the next instant he laughs, choked. "Yeah. Of course, *Technoblade*. We'll both have our terrible names."

"I hate you."

“I hate you too,” Wilbur says, though it's fond and warm, “You are, by far, the worst brother I've ever had.”

For a brief, speechless second, Techno is thrown back in time to when Tommy told him, *Techno, you're the coolest brother I've ever had*, windows down, hair tangled by the wind, lungs full of air and gasping for breath.

Somehow, Wilbur's words make him feel the same way.

Both of them are achingly aware of the goodbye hanging unsteadily between them and the clock, ticking down until Wilbur's shifting his feet, ready to go.

“Have fun in Los Angeles,” Techno says eventually. “I hope you get a tan.”

Wilbur cracks a smile. It's not one of the flashing celebrity ones, but something more private, more genuine. “Thanks.”

Techno flicks his fingers towards the terminal gate. “Off you go.”

Wilbur's grin spreads wider. He puts on those ridiculous, bug-eyed sunglasses, the ones that do nothing to hide himself. “I'll call when I land.”

“I'll be busy.”

“Okay,” Wilbur says. “I'll call later.”

“I won't pick up.”

“You will!” Wilbur calls, grinning ear to ear, “I know you will!”

And then he's sucked into the crowd gathered around security.

Techno stays watching his head in the crowd to see if he'll turn around, but Wilbur Soot fades into the crowd and doesn't look back.

Techno turns on his heel and leaves the airport.

For all of Tommy's talk about being happy that Wilbur is leaving, he doesn't appear happy at all. In fact, he looks downright miserable.

“I still need to pack some of my boxes,” Techno says, thinking out loud despite Tommy being clearly uninterested. “I have clothing that's going on the plane with me, but I'll need to pick up furniture there.”

“Whatever,” Tommy says sourly.

Techno scowls at him. Tommy flops back on Techno's bed and sighs, long-suffering. “Look up a little. There's good things ahead of you.”

Tommy mutters something rude under his breath, and Techno holds up his middle finger.

Tommy is supposedly helping Techno pack right now, although he's not doing much help at all. As Techno digs through his closet and drawers, looking for anything he might want to bring with him, Tommy only becomes more and more of a nuisance. Enough so that Techno banished him to his bed and instead packed everything himself.

"I could help, you know," Tommy points out, not for the first time.

"Shut up and just keep me company," Techno sighs.

"This is boring," Tommy says, but continues staring, expression sour, up at the ceiling.

While he sits in sullen silence, Techno continues digging through every box and drawer and cabinet that he owns. He finds things that he thought he had lost from decades ago, like that debate shirt he received in middle school doesn't fit him anymore, that Techno hasn't seen in years. He sets it in the pile of clothes specifically intended for donation. He finds more things, too; socks that had lost their pairs years ago; a wrinkled pair of jeans Techno was convinced Wilbur had stolen from him; a hoodie from high school that had vanished in the laundry but now could be found hanging neatly in the back of his closet.

As he begins meticulously organizing everything into suitcases, he and Tommy talk about anything underneath the sun. Tommy is serious about the idea of film, it turns out. Where Techno had at first thought it was simply another way of mimicking Wilbur, now he learns that it's so much more for Tommy. His little brother talks about all sorts of things Techno has no idea about, and he has the feeling that Tommy has only scraped the surface so far— favorite movies that Techno has never heard of, angles and camera movements and writing a coherent plot that pulls the audience along with it.

"It's nice that you're studying this," comments Techno, "It seems like you're enjoying it."

"I know," sighs Tommy, "Better than fuckin' *biology* or some shit. Yesterday Tubbo told me that he's thinking about studying *biochemical engineering*. That sounds like a death wish."

"That sounds awful. Is he serious?"

"You don't know Tubbo like I do," says Tommy flatly, "I think he *is* serious. We're going to have to have a talk, Big T and I—"

Tommy abruptly goes silent.

Techno stops from rummaging through his sock drawer to turn at him. "You okay?"

Tommy stares at his phone, brow furrowed. "I'm fine. Is there, uh. Is there any reason why Wilbur might be calling me?"

Techno thinks back to what he told Wilbur, right before he boarded that flight. *Call Tommy. Every week.*

"No idea," Techno lies, "You should probably pick up, though."

Tommy stares at his phone for another five seconds, stricken, before bursting into motion. He slides off Techno's bed and closes the door behind him, and as he walks down the hallway, Techno can hear a cautious *hello?*

Something burns inside of him— not the raging fire of anger, but something softer, that feels like candlelight to the touch.

He's well aware that it's too soon to start acknowledging whether it's actually making a difference, whether those "promised" weekly phone calls are going to last— but Tommy's laugh is as bright and clear as a bell, radiating through the house, and Techno has the feeling that perhaps, something will start to change.

Where the days until Wilbur's flight had sped by, so quickly that Techno felt as if he blinked and the hours had vanished, the days until Techno's flight are slow, lethargic, until each morning feels as if it's a month ago. Every minute could be its own year if Techno didn't know any better.

The house was quiet when Wilbur first left, but over the span of two days, it transforms back into the coherent dynamic it once was. Techno has always meshed well with Tommy, who bounces humor and conversation topics off of him easily, and Phil provides a perfect counterpoint for when Tommy's excitement gets out of hand. Techno and Phil, alternatively, are quiet together, conversing more with silence than with words. When Tommy is out of the house, Techno's never felt more comfortable.

Unfortunately, that comfort doesn't last. There's so much to be done; off the top of his head, he has to email three separate professors for a letter of recommendation, finish up his application essay, figure out when he's getting a bed frame delivered to his new apartment (because he can't sleep on the floor, can he?) and about a dozen more things that seem impossible to accomplish the longer he thinks about it.

He also has that therapy appointment.

It had taken six separate, anxiety-inducing calls, but finally one person got back to him— a kind, soft-spoken woman named Betsy, who announced that she had Wednesday afternoons open and could meet with him long distance, so long as he was willing to work with her as well.

Techno's seen a therapist before— when he was first diagnosed with ADHD, Phil had organized a whole series of meetings to help him along. Not only did Techno have a psychiatrist (that is, before he stopped taking his medication) but also a weekly therapist. That changed when he went to college, though; where some of his friends found the lack of a schedule suffocating and overwhelming, Techno had never found anything more freeing. He had stopped seeing his therapist shortly after that.

But that first therapist was for things like *executive dysfunction* and *hyperfocusing* and all things that he was struggling to deal with— things that he's gotten much better at over his years at university. Things like managing his family and building a healthy relationship with his brothers and father, however, are completely different.

He's supposed to meet with Betsy this afternoon, and Techno works himself up into a horrible fit of anxiety over it. By the time he gets in the car to drive himself to her office, his hands are trembling.

His phone buzzes at his side, startling him. Techno glances at it.

The text is short and to the point. It's a picture of the beach as the sun rises, golden and iridescent. The words attached only say *yesterday, 6:57 pm*.

Techno stares at the image for a long, long time. His chest is tight. Wilbur's thinking of him, all the

way across the country.

He saves the image to his phone, and then spurs the car into motion.

“How did it go?” Phil asks quietly, when Techno returns.

Techno feels hollowed out, as if someone has pulled him apart and ripped out the things that make him whole. It’s a sensation that he hasn’t experienced in what feels like years— but Betsy’s piercing gaze hadn’t wavered, and she had seemed to innately understand what he was struggling with.

She had said a lot of things that hurt to hear, and when he told her that she was adopted, she only raised an eyebrow.

If you’re going to say abandonment issues, Techno had interrupted, already on edge, I’ve heard it before. I don’t need to hear it again.

Now why, she asked calmly, eyes scrutinizing, would you bring that up in the first place?

That conversation secured the fact that she’s a decent therapist. Techno has the sense that he’ll continue to see her.

“It went alright,” Techno says, and brushes past him, “Nothing interesting.”

Phil hums quietly and doesn’t press, only saying, “I’m glad that you’re seeing a therapist again.”

Techno pauses with his hand over the fridge handle. “Thank you?”

“That wasn’t meant to be an insult,” Phil continues, “I only meant that— therapy shouldn’t be something that’s stigmatized. I’m glad that you’re seeking help.”

Techno stares into the depths of the fridge. He had talked about this with Betsy, but Techno’s not the type of person to yell— he can count on one hand the amount of times he’s had an outburst in the past few years. It makes him feel terribly guilty for shouting at his family last week.

“Thank you,” he says, less of a question this time. In an attempt to relieve some of the tension, he jokes, “I think Tommy could use some help too, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Phil huffs a small laugh. “I’ll bring it up with him sometime.”

“Will you?”

After a contemplative moment, Phil nods.

“Now,” he says, diverting the conversation, “You said you needed help with moving, right? Tell me what you need.”

The tension, finally, starts to dissipate.

Techno clears his mind, packages everything away. He doesn’t need it now; he’ll have the opportunity to unpack it later, when he’s in a better headspace.

He sucks in a deep breath.

“I need to finish packing,” he says, to his father who is trying desperately, with all his strength, and who is maybe, maybe starting to succeed, “You can join me, if you’d like.”

On the drive to the airport, Techno mentally recites the checklist of everything he’ll need for his new apartment. That doesn’t stop Phil from asking, for the millionth time, “And you have everything you need?”

“I do,” Techno repeats, “And if I didn’t, it’s already too late.”

“I know,” Phil sighs; they’re halfway to the airport, Tommy listening to music silently in the backseat, so it truly is too late if he’s missing something important. Still, Phil goes over the checklist again: “Wallet, ID, money, boarding pass—”

“I have everything. And I’ll print mine there.”

“What if there’s a long line?”

“Phil,” Tommy interrupts from the backseat, “You’re acting neurotic.”

Phil sighs. “That’s not very kind.”

“I’m only saying,” Tommy scowls, and hunkers down further so the seat belt digs into his neck. “Techno’s fine. Everything will work out.”

Where Wilbur had one duffel bag and a traveling backpack, Techno has three separate suitcases. Tommy helps lug two of them over to the front desk, when Phil finally parks the car. It’s only a matter of minutes until Techno is reliving the scenario from a week ago— only this time, he’s the one departing, and Tommy and Phil are taking his place. It’s an eerie reversal of roles.

Tommy shuffles his feet. “Goodbye, I suppose.”

“We’ll still talk,” Techno says, “Don’t act like this is a funeral.”

“I know,” Tommy crosses his arms impatiently. “Well? Aren’t you going to say goodbye to me too?”

“Of course,” Techno says. “This is my goodbye. Are you going to go back next semester?”

Tommy nods.

“And you’ll take decent classes.”

“Only the best they have to offer..”

“Good,” Techno says. “You’d better keep up your grades too.”

“You and Phil both told me that,” Tommy huffs. “Of course I will. I’m not an idiot.”

“You have proven yourself to be an idiot many times,” Techno jokes.

Tommy's lower lip wobbles.

Without warning, he hurls himself into Techno's arms.

Techno, a little shocked, doesn't know what to do.

Tommy squeezes his waist, and eventually Techno's arms rest around his shoulders. Tommy buries his head in Techno's neck and tries to act like he's not crying.

"Don't cry," Techno says awkwardly, and pats the back of his head.

"I'm gonna be all alone with Phil for months," Tommy sobs. "He's going to drive me insane."

Techno makes eye contact with Phil over Tommy's shuddering shoulders and mouths, *don't make it too bad for him*.

Of course I won't, Phil mouths back, and Techno runs a careful hand through Tommy's hair.

"And Tubbo's going to leave in a week too, and it'll just be me," Tommy cries.

"They have these things called *phones*," Techno says.

"It's not the same!"

"I know," Techno sighs, still holding him, "It'll be alright."

Eventually Tommy steps back. His eyes are red-rimmed, his cheeks are red. He snuffles, takes another step back.

"Forget that happened," he mutters, "Would you?"

His eyes are still full and close to spilling, but Techno nods. Tommy gives him a wobbly, watery smile, and Techno almost feels like he might cry, too.

"Your flight takes off soon," Phil interrupts. Although he obviously doesn't want to rush Techno, a sense of urgency creeps into his voice regardless. "You should go through security."

Techno steps forward to give Phil a hug as well. Neither of them need to say goodbye out loud; both he and Phil know what there is to be said.

"Go on, now," Phil says, and Techno steps into line. He turns back to wave to them only once— to see his father and his little brother, standing side by side, before they vanish from his vision.

He makes it to his gate with little to no fuss, and slides past a woman with an oversized handbag and two little kids running unsupervised through the terminal. His flight is about to finish boarding, and Techno gets in line without much jostling at all.

Right before he steps onto the plane, he glances down at his phone.

There are three twin texts, each sent separately from each other. The first two are from Tommy and Phil, presumably right after he stepped through security. The last is from Wilbur.

Have a safe flight, it reads, call me when you land.

Techno's heart twists in his chest. There is no name for the emotion he feels.

He steps onto the plane, and he doesn't look back.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so much for reading this fic and commenting, it truly means the most, and i'm very grateful for each one of you.

as always, if you enjoyed, please leave kudos/comments or subscribe to me on ao3 for my next fic! again, thank you all so much <3

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